

Share Wealth-By Earning It

I was impressed when President Roosevelt in his first inaugural address described conditions as follows:

"Values have shrunk to fantastic levels; taxes have risen; our ability to pay has fallen; government of all kinds is faced by serious curtailment of income; . . . farmers find no market for their produce; the savings of many thousands of families are gone. A host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence. Only a foolish optimist can deny the stark realities of the moment."

This description seemed vaguely familiar and then I remembered that more than fifty years ago another American thinker spoke of his times in these words:

"From all parts of the civilized world come complaints of industrial depression; of labor condemned to involuntary idleness; of capital massed and wasting; of pecuniary distress among business men; of want and suffering and anxiety among the working classes. All the dull deadening pain, all the keen, maddening anguish, that to great masses of men are involved in the words 'hard times' afflict the world today."

More than half a century of time between these two pictures and apparently no economic progress.

What is the matter with us? Are we incapable of learning the lessons of our own experience or are we being misled, deceived, blinded by those who are supposed to understand?

Between the depression of the eighteen seventies and that of the nineteen thirties there have been others of varying intensity, but all alike in certain ways. In all of them a major problem was taxes. In all of them the mass of the people starved and suffered and tried in vain to find out why, every ten years or so, they seemed destined to lose their homes, their jobs and their savings.

After each depression various economists pointed the way to a better era, but each one pointed a different way and before we could be sure which was the right way a new depression would be upon us.

Our President told us that in trying to get the country on a sound economic basis we must stop treating vital disorders superficially and get at the basic cause of the disease. In doing so, he suggested, we must not hesitate to abandon ideas which have been highly thought of in the past, but which have proved to be mistaken theories and "outworn tradition."

And that, I believe, is just what we must do if we expect to end the succession of economic calamities

which has occurred ever since our country lost its primitive social structure and became the complex, hectic civilization which it is.

Whether a civilization be simple or complex the welfare of the people will depend largely upon the rules which govern the production and distribution of its wealth. When the distribution of wealth is such that one man gets less than he deserves while another man gets more, there is something wrong with the scheme.

I do not wish to be understood to mean that one man should get the same as every other man; there would be injustice in that as long as one man can create more than another man. The point is that if every man gets the full value of the product he creates then—and then only—do we have just distribution.

That there seems to be unjust distribution of the world's wealth many economists and all radicals recognize.

What many of them do not recognize is that unjust distribution of wealth is primarily brought about by an unjust method of taxation, and could be cured by changing our point of view and revising the principles of our tax system.

—William C. de Mille.

See: "Progress and Poverty," pp. 5-6; 408-414.