

A Humane Value System

SYDNEY J. Harris, the nationally syndicated columnist who took the Henry George course in Chicago, spoke at the conference banquet and reviewed the characteristics and challenges of the affluent society. The economy produces a tremendous quantity of goods but it does not reach the submerged one-fifth of the population who need it most. It costs a great deal to be poor and public welfare is expensive for everyone because it is a drain on the resources and the civic machinery.

Meanwhile some of the simplest pastimes and luxuries such as fresh clean air and water are becoming rare. We have always used earth, air and water as garbage dumps, but now we are doing so on an enormously expanding scale. It may be less well known that carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is rising rapidly and will produce marked climatic changes over the entire globe.

Rich as we are, the advertisers must constantly think up new ways to get people to spend money, for restraint on buying would slow down the economy. Much of this affluence appeals to the most egocentric motives of people rather than to their altruistic motives, and some of the old fashioned virtues have been undermined. The practical ethics of the past was built on an assumption of scarcity and need for hard work. Extravagance and self indulgence were considered cardinal sins. Now the people who make the most are those who spend the most, and liberal credit is encouraged.

The nature of work has changed radically since fewer people are living by the sweat of their brows, and many work shorter hours. The number of

white collar workers has passed the number of blue collar workers, and a greatly decreased number of farmers are able to produce far more than is consumed. The need for unskilled workers has been reduced almost to the vanishing point.

The move from farm to factory, followed by a great upsurge of office and service work, produced two technological revolutions in the last fifty years. The third revolution presently threatens other skills, as machines largely take over the duties of additional clerical workers. We cannot find employment for these people in the private sector under our present tax structure, and surely the government will have to take up the slack.

Science and technology have produced most of the obvious social, political, economic and cultural changes. These in turn lead to further changes in the development of science and technology. Beyond a certain point it becomes difficult to distinguish cause from effect. Among young people there is a sense of personal impotence. They feel left behind in a too rapidly changing world.

The quest for guidance begins where it always has — in the human heart. If our affluence deafens us to the cries for help, understanding, peace and justice, we shall all perish through shortsightedness and greed. If it enables us to grow in sympathy and cooperation then it will have been a blessing. Without a value system that is more universal and humane than any we have practised before, our affluence will become like the gold that turned King Midas into the most wretched man on earth.

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“We are interested in economics only because of the ethics.”

— Mitchell S. Lurio