

# Prosperity

by Clyde Wilson

**DECLINING PROSPERITY** is now a settled fact of American life.

Prosperity is not measured by the day's average of stock speculation, or the profits of bankers, or the munificence of government subsidies and salaries, or the consumption of luxury goods, or even by the Gross Domestic Product. It is amazing how in a few short decades American "educators," "experts," "journalists," and "statesmen" have banished age-old truths from public discourse.

Prosperity is when the great bulk of families have some property and a secure source of living, large or small. When nearly everybody has an abundance of necessities and access to some small luxuries and leisure. Naturally, debt, the ancient nemesis of prosperity, is minimal and temporary in a prosperous society for both government and people—it is a device for emergencies or starting up promising ventures. A prosperous society is made up mostly of people of middling economic status, with relatively few very rich and very poor. The government apparatus is small, unobtrusive, and mainly local. Religion, charity, education, and the arts flourish, especially where there is cultural cohesion, through private patronage. (Cultural cohesion would seem to be typical of societies with widely shared prosperity.)

Americans have been too pretentious in touting our country as *the* land of opportunity. However, it is true that America has been *a* land of opportunity. Not always, of course. There have been stretches of history when it was not true, the most recent of which is now. But as a general proposition "land of opportunity" has had a good deal of accuracy. America has been with some justice thought of as a land where ability and effort counted more than

inherited status, where people could expect to be more prosperous than the previous generations, where, sometimes, the sky was the limit for the enterprising and gifted. A land that was very good, compared with the Europe left behind, for the common man. Frederick Jackson Turner thought that this was because of the great excess of unexploited resources over population, a condition which, he pointed out at the end of the 19th century, was coming to an end.

If I have drawn a proper description of prosperity, there cannot be much disagreement about my opening proposition of decline. A vague sense of this decline is what motivates the people who are joining Tea Parties. When I was a college undergraduate a half-century ago, a professor asked a large class for a show of hands: Who expected to be more prosperous than his parents? There was at least an 85-percent affirmative response rate. I doubt if it would be 20 percent today—even less among native white Americans. Unemployment or underemployment is now the settled lot of millions of people who once would have been solid members of the middle class—even among the skilled and highly skilled. The young remain dependent longer than they used to on the older generation, who were able to accumulate some wealth in better times. Meanwhile, the rich have reached levels of wealth unprecedented in human history and which in themselves are irrefutable proofs of social ill health.

Starting and operating one's own business in America has never been more difficult and less promising than now. You can be sure that that optimistic 20 percent of young folks are not thinking in traditional terms about hard work leading to success. They are thinking that they are smart

enough to get a cut of the going racket. Some of them will be disappointed. And millions of hard-working Americans live on a dangerously small margin of survival. Millions more live off the books in an all-cash economy.

The belief that merit leads to appropriate reward has always been only a partial truth. It does not make allowance for such important considerations as native endowment, luck, circumstances, and connections, and that human beings are more complicated (and more valuable) than mere units of labor. But there has been enough truth in the proposition to serve as an essential factor of social morale. The connection between merit and reward has been largely abolished in American society today, and most people do not believe in it anymore. How, after all, did Michelle Obama, who twice failed the bar exam, merit a quarter-million-dollar salary? And that is only one of countless examples.

The consequences of this loss of social morale could in the long run be more serious than a revolution or world war.

And this, at a time when the eternal global superiority of the American way is proclaimed by presidents and pundits (with incredible ignorance and short-sightedness).

The public discourse (and the "professional" discourse, too) on economics is cursed by the natural proclivity to treat sequences as consequences. If B follows A, then A was the cause of B. In fact, in understanding the wealth of nations, that is a bad assumption—because there are always multiple variables, some of them unknown, unpredictable, too deep to be observed, and even spiritual and unmeasurable.

But this natural tendency is invaluable to politicians (and "experts"). It al-

lows for endless obfuscation of real issues and avoidance of honest analysis and debate—which, indeed, is the purpose of American public discourse. Bad B follows my opponent's bad A, while good B follows upon my good A. The politicians, of course, don't care whether the description is true or beneficial, only whether it is advantageous to themselves. That is the difference between a politician and a statesman, an extinct species, the last doubtful sighting of a live example occurring over half a century ago.

Studying the economic conflicts of earlier American history has convinced me that public discourse has almost always been carried on in deceptive party polemics and has seldom touched the root issues. Whether there should be a Federal Reserve or not is not the proper question. The Federal Reserve was merely a centralization of a power over money that the federal gov-

ernment under Lincoln had already given away to the bankers long before. The real question is: Who, if anyone, has the right to expand and contract the money supply? All the blather about tariffs and free trade likewise misses the point. There never has been such a thing as pure free trade, and it does not exist now. Here is the root question: When tariffs were beneficial to the Northern rich and burdensome to everyone else, the United States had tariffs; when "free trade" is beneficial to the Northern rich and a burden to every one else, we have "free trade." Why? I see no reason to expect the Tea Partiers to ask the right questions, much less come up with answers.

We are told that a multibillion-dollar bailout of Goldman Sachs was necessary to save "our" economy. Just recently the buffoon Colin Powell (a museum-quality exhibit of the disconnect between merit

and reward) announced that "we" need illegal aliens to operate "our" economy. The Economy, Stupid, has become a monstrous god without any interest in the well-being of his people. Now and then, his priests inform us what sacrifices we must make to keep in his good graces.

Nobody can understand or completely manage a large economy. Surely, there are not many "lessons of history" more obvious and certain than that. But economics is a matter of human thought and action. Human thought and action can be applied to such matters as trade, labor, the money supply, in ways that are better or worse. But better or worse for whom? We need to remember what prosperity is supposed to feel like. But first we must find out who "we" are.

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## The Bookman

by Wayne Allensworth

I REMEMBER GRANDDAD as an old man, sitting in his reading chair or working in his garden, but you could still see the younger man in him, the one who had ridden the rails during the Depression, seeking work in California and Oregon with his brother-in-law Vines. He jumped those trains and saw the West, this son of a town sheriff and railroad man who in his youth had seen Geronimo at Fort Sill and met Frank James. He was a working man who always seemed to dress well—I remember a picture of him in a double-breasted suit and snap-brim hat, a flower in his lapel, posing with my grandmother, and even in his work clothes he seemed neat and well groomed. He had a distinguished sounding name—Oliver Armstrong Allensworth—for a man from such a humble background.

And Granddad always had his books with him.

The books reinforced the stories he'd tell: stories of the James boys and the last Comanche war chief, Quanah Parker, and of his travels out West and the Great Depression, and there were old stories passed down in the family. We would sit on a Sunday afternoon in the room where he kept his books in a cabinet next to his reading chair. Sunday afternoons might mean watermelon outside, or the wonderful aroma of my grandmother frying chicken, the best I ever had, in the kitchen of the house that sat on cinder blocks at the end of a gravel road. It had a big yard and a goldfish pond Granddad had built, and you could see the vast garden from the window. There was a Victrola where my grandmother kept her Bob Wills records, thick as plate glass, and pictures of roosters and other animals my Uncle Taft had made. But it was the stories and the books that drew me. Sometimes Granddad would reach for one, and

leaf through it and read a passage. It might be from a classic like the *Iliad*, or from an adventure story (he favored Rafael Sabatini and Westerns), a mystery, or a history book. We read everything and savored the words. Sometimes he seemed to have a need to speak them, and we enjoyed every one.

Granddad was a man who read for knowledge and wisdom, but most of all for pleasure. Not entertainment in the sense of a temporary diversion, but for pleasure, which is something else again. Pleasure stays with you, and you are not likely to forget a book that gives you pleasure. Reading for pleasure is a lost art, because the world moves too fast now to savor anything, or to cultivate such pleasures, connecting the words on a page to the sights and sounds around you, the characters to people you know, enjoying the look of the book's cover art and even the smell of the pages, and being able to distinguish a Scribner's from a Doubleday, the New American Library from The Dial Press, right down to the typeface.

Like Granddad, I would sometimes open a favorite book and read particular passages again and again:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. . . . Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin ware-

houses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

—*Moby-Dick: or The Whale*,  
by Herman Melville

I have the Modern Library edition of *Moby-Dick* with the marvelous illustrations by Rockwell Kent.

This is the verse you grave for me:

Here he lies where he long'd to be;

Home is the sailor, home from the sea,

And the hunter home from the hill.

—*Requiem*, by Robert Louis Stevenson

That passage is from the first book of poetry I ever owned, *One Hundred and One Famous Poems*, compiled by Roy J. Cook. I loved the old-fashioned portraits of the poets, with their beards and high collars. Their dignity was on every page.

Then they began to climb and they were going to the East it seemed, and then it darkened and they were in a storm, the rain so thick it seemed like flying through a waterfall, and then they were out and Compie turned his head and grinned and pointed and there, ahead,