

FREEDOM, PRODUCTIVITY, and PROGRESS

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EMERSON once remarked that if a man made a better mousetrap the world would beat a path to his door, but he neglected to mention what some of the folks would do when they got there. It is to be expected that the Amalgamated Mice of America would mouse-cott the new arrangement, nor can one

help sympathizing with those who may be hurt in the short run by the march of progress. But more than likely, the Emerson

Better Mousetrap Company would come in for a lot of opposition from others with less obvious reasons for objecting to the innovation. Unfortunately, it seems that ever since our stone age grandparents thought of moving out of the cave, anyone who upset the status quo by trying to do things a bit more efficiently has been suspect. Doubtless that is why human history is largely the story of poverty and stagnation.

We often fail to realize how hard it was to get the machine age in motion and how hostile forces threatened to swallow the fresh new ideas which sparked this revolution before it got started. Progress is not inevitable or automatic. Picture James Watt struggling to build a steam en-

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gine without the tools and equipment we take for granted. The modern industrialist, used to dealing in thousandths of an inch, may begin to appreciate the problems of these pioneers when he notes the satisfaction expressed by Watt's partner when they succeeded in boring a fifty-inch cylinder that "does not err the thickness of an old shilling in any part." Try using a thin dime as a precision gauge, or imagine a "fit" that sloppy.

But that was not the greatest hurdle. Years before, when Watt wanted to set up his workshop in Glasgow, he was not permitted to do so because the local tradesmen thought there were already more than enough such establishments. Watt got his chance only because the University took him as their instrument maker. Later, when factories were developing in England to make use of the new power and equipment, mobs of workers swept down upon the mills and destroyed them. The new technique, incredibly crude by our standards, might produce too much and drive the price of cloth below the starvation level for the weavers who still plied their trade by hand. Their fears were justified: they couldn't compete with the Frankenstein monster which spewed abundance and threatened their jobs.

We may imagine that the "surplus" problem is modern, a tragic consequence of the phenomenal productivity of the machine, now being automated to further compound the difficulty. But mankind's neurotic fear of abundance (pleniphobia, if one may coin a term) is deep-seated and was old when Englishmen first discovered that a mechanical device could spin several threads in place of one. It is hard for us to see how they could have imagined that their *little* was too much; but they so believed, and responded by rigging the market just as we do. The result was to render the "times" — or as we would say, the economy — "out of joint." Eventually, we may see that our maladjustments grow out of the same regulations and controls which they belatedly realized were causing rather than curing their difficulties.

The sudden burst of productivity, coming nearly two centuries ago to a world with a chronic and psychopathic fear of abundance, generated a bitterness against the machine which persists even today. Generations of soft-hearted people, refusing to look beyond the obvious for the true significance of the industrial revolution, are perpetuating a misunderstanding that need not have developed in the first place.

For the simple truth is that plenty is desirable. Everyone wants *more* for himself and only seeks to limit output for others because he believes he will get more if they have less – an immoral, selfish, and short-sighted policy which is self-defeating and only leads to economic and political chaos.

We try to dress our ancient practices in modern garb and imagine they are necessitated by the stupendous productivity of the machine. A recent textbook tells the student that two men with a combine can cut and thresh as much wheat in a day as 125 laborers could do by hand, or a ratio of 62½ to 1 in our favor. This overlooks the fact that combines are produced, not by rubbing magic lamps, but by a long line of men and machines, which reduces the net ratio considerably. Dr. William H. Peterson of New York University thinks we were perhaps six times as productive in 1960 as in 1800, rather than 62½ times as implied in that other figure. If people today want a dozen times as much as their ancestors did in 1800, there should be no problem; and we know that human wants are insatiable – we feel we must have a multitude of things they never dreamed of having. But, if we devise all sorts of fantastic schemes to reduce output we'll be right back where

they were in 1800 – cutting and threshing grain by hand.

Pre-Industrial Society

It might help our thinking if we could back up a few centuries to compare the “before-and-after” of industrialization. Practically, we can do almost as well by going to a primitive village in some backward area of the world where people still farm with a hoe and craftsmen still ply their ancient trades by hand. Having had this experience a few years ago, I assure you that the glamour of “going native,” the simple and unspoiled life, fades as quickly as the morning haze under the rays of the tropical sun. Our neighbor was a weaver who spent day after day on his veranda weaving a narrow web of crude cloth on his primitive loom supported by three sticks. “How quaint,” you say, but that is only part of the story. The poor native was a man of years, malnourished and unkempt, and his craft had fallen on evil days. Competition from cheap, imported textiles – made with high-priced labor – was driving the old man out of business and he was too old to change. Women in America may think that dry goods are too expensive; everything we ever buy always costs too much and, for some perverse reason, everything we have to sell brings too

little. Although our weaver earned only a pittance, his cloth was relatively expensive by our standards and fantastically so for his neighbors. Nor was the reason obscure: he simply produced so little.

A further tragedy in such lands is that staple foods are not cheap either, although some items may be. A balanced and sufficient diet is a luxury few can afford. Throughout the backward areas of the world obesity is associated in the native mind with wealth, since no one else can afford to eat that much. For weeks or even months of the year, after the seed is planted and before the new crop is harvested, the chronic shortage becomes acute—the “Hungry Season” in native parlance. It is impossible to produce an abundance of food on sterile, eroded hillsides with a short-handled hoe.

Their poverty cannot be attributed entirely to crude tools and primitive techniques. Nor is this one of those horrible examples of exploitation with an absentee landlord behind the scenes taking all the profits. It is scarcely worth considering whether things were divided properly in the village where I lived, since redistributing would not make much difference; a man's fair share of the *little* wouldn't be very much.

Everyone Is Poor

The real problem is that everyone is poor. And a strong contributing factor must be that no one really owns anything; it belongs to the group, the extended family. If one urges a native farmer to grow more to tide his family over the “hungry season,” he will point out the futility of it. If he had a modest surplus when the relatives ran out of food, they would all visit him until it was exhausted. So, why not loaf with the neighbors now and go hungry with them later? Togetherness, with a vengeance!

Another factor may further explain the general backwardness and stagnation. The natives suffer from the familiar socialist delusion that one cannot prosper except at the expense of others. So, if anyone in the village seems to be getting ahead, the word is whispered around that he possesses a charm, “boa medicine,” which promotes his interest but harms his neighbors. Assorted tragedies and misfortunes in the village will build resentment until the charmed one is finally hauled before the local chief. He will then be prosecuted and persecuted until he is reduced to the lowest common denominator of native existence, to the same level of want and misery with everyone else in the village.

The Source of Abundance

It is hard for us to imagine how little their *little* can be. A traveler in a primitive region came upon a family bowed down with grief because they had lost — not a child or mother — just a lowly needle! In colonial America they are said to have burned houses to recover the nails. Nails were even used as money until Jacob Perkins invented a machine in 1795 that would make 60,000 of them a week. (Imagine the “inflation”!) After that, they sold nails by the keg, not by the dozen. Ordinary pins once cost twenty cents each (when twenty cents was a fair start on a day’s wage) and were given as gifts — until a man broke the pin market with a machine that would turn out two million a week. Wearing fitted shoes was once the exclusive privilege of monarchs and the very wealthy. Ordinary folks wore clodhoppers which fit very sloppily; fitting a pair of tailor-made shoes was like having a portrait painted. A bushel of wheat cost an English laborer the equivalent of five days’ pay in 1770. It was not until John Deere’s plow broke the prairies, and McCormick’s reaper speeded the harvest — plus a lot of other inventions in the

last century — that the English laborer had anything like an adequate diet. Famines used to be as common in Western Europe as they still are in underdeveloped areas today.

But, why continue? We can tell the story of modern progress in terms of more adequate food, shelter, clothing, and even luxuries for the average man and his family. Or, we can continue to grieve over the industrially “displaced persons” — the nailmakers, pinmakers, shoemakers, and hoe and sickle farmers that the new machines released for more productive opportunities. I recall seeing an old livery stable operator sitting by his door waiting for the customers that no longer came. Perhaps the automobile should have been abolished! His competitor down the street spent his spare time tinkering with a “tin lizzie,” and as the horse and buggy faded out, he converted his stable to a garage. Perhaps a dirge for old dobbin is appropriate, but why not look at the positive side for a while? Progress means growing pains, but growth betokens life, health, and new conveniences and comforts for millions. Let progress reign! ♦

HINDSIGHT ON THE LIBERTY LEAGUE

FOR PEOPLE who are concerned with the difficulties of operating — or even formally maintaining — a republic in a time when practically everybody has ceased to believe in the concepts of natural law and inalienable rights, George Wolfskill's *The Revolt of the Conservatives: A History of the American Liberty League 1934-1940* (Houghton Mifflin, 303 pages, \$5.00) provides an amazing, instructive casebook. But its meaning goes deeper than anything that is provided by the author's rather shallow moralizing.

Dr. Wolfskill, a first-rate researcher who writes a clean, crisp prose, knows that he is telling the story of a great practical failure. The Liberty League spent thousands of dollars and thousands of hours in the effort to defeat Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936, yet succeeded nowhere save in Maine and Vermont, which might have gone for Roosevelt's opponent, Alfred M. Landon, anyway. From this Dr. Wolfskill concludes that

the Liberty League high command, rich men for the most part, were "the wrong people . . . espousing the wrong philosophy at the wrong time." What he should have said is that it is fatal to be both rich and right at a time when a popular majority has been weaned away from the basic constitutive idea of a republic, which is that all men, whether rich or poor, are entitled to equal protection in inalienable rights deriving not from the state but from their Creator.

To operate a republic on the opposite theory, that rights are the transient and entirely relativistic dispensations agreed upon by 51 per cent of the voters, is a long-run impossibility, for the majority, cut loose from moral anchors, will progressively eat up the spiritual and material capital on which society and the state itself depend for their continuity. But 1936 was not a propitious year for long-term considerations.

Having entered the basic objection to Dr. Wolfskill's approach,