

Worth Through Work

WHITING WILLIAMS, the author of a challenging and charming book which bears the somewhat enigmatic title of *America's Main-spring and the Great Society* (Frederick Fell, \$5.00), is eighty-nine years old, which, for a publishing writer, must constitute a record of sorts. Far from succumbing to normal octogenarian garrulity, Mr. Williams is a gaffer who distills wisdom. In his younger days, as a nonacademic sociologist, Mr. Williams used to spend a good part of his time disguised as a common laborer. He worked in coal mines in Pennsylvania, Wales, the Saar, and elsewhere; in steel mills here and in Britain; and in railroad yards and along the docks. During the depression of the thirties he camped out in flophouses. His effort, everywhere, was to find out what the working man and the "underprivileged" really thought.

What he learned is that most

men, if uncorrupted, have an innate desire for "worth through work." People want money, of course. But even more important than money is self-esteem. Mr. Williams discovered this in the most unlikely places; even the Skid Rows in which he lived had their hierarchies of worth, reserving the name of "Scissorbill" for bums who were completely unproductive. The hobo, so Mr. Williams learned, rates himself above the tramp; the tramp in turn considers himself above the scissorbill. "We 'boes," so the Secretary of the Hoboes Union told Whiting Williams, "are migratory workers, itinerant laborers! If we don't hop from the Northwest lumber camp in the winter down to the Oklahoma wheat fields in the summer — and get there on time, mind you — w'y, crops go to waste . . . So we 'boes have to take the train — 'thout

payin' no fare, of course. But a tramp! . . . He walks from job to job — 'cause he don't give a damn whether he gets there or not . . . But don't never take a tramp for a bum! He neither rides, nor walks, nor works! He's a no-good complete."

Investigating life among the bums who were lower than the tramps, Mr. Williams found the need for esteem struggling to keep itself alive even at the very bottom of society. For example, no really self-respecting bum would ask for his portion of mulligan stew without contributing a single sandwich to the collective dish.

A Timely Message

Since Mr. Williams' experience dates back to pre-Great Society days, his description of "America's mainspring" as the "wish for worth through work" might seem outmoded in its substance. He himself recognizes that he may have written a book about the American world as it used to be. But the Great Society is, actually, merely a continuation of the New Deal, and Mr. Williams saw in the thirties how the "mainspring" of seeking "worth through work" could be badly bent by the practice of giving government relief to people without requiring them to do anything to earn it. Men, so Mr. Williams insists, are not

born to be "scissorbills." But, as he says, "we also know this — how easily we can become scissorbills!" All that is necessary is "to adopt the bum's scapegoats and false reasoning for side-stepping responsibility while adjusting to the crisis' challenge instead of mastering it." Mr. Williams fears "the welfare state's increasingly generous gifts," not because he likes to see people hungry, but because he knows the story of the Florida coast town where, after the shrimp boats had taken their operations elsewhere, the seagulls were found to be starving because they have forgotten how to live off fish.

Lessons from the Marshall Plan

Though Mr. Williams hasn't investigated life in the so-called ghettos in the nineteen sixties, the relevance of his book to the contemporary situation is obvious. A government can't encourage "expectations" and expect quiescence. If the expectations aren't related to the opportunity for work, the multiplication of scissorbills will soon defeat the effort to combat poverty through government programs. We are now hearing about the necessity for a "Marshall Plan" for the American cities. But if a "Marshall Plan" is only money, it merely delays the time for a final reckoning.

Money, if it inhibits the growth of the self-help philosophy, is worse than useless.

Some of Mr. Williams' experience dates back to the period of the Marshall Plan in Europe. The money we exported immediately after World War II moved into a community where skills were waiting to be put to work. But Mr. Williams finds the export of needed funds to Europe was less significant than "the export of our unique respect — indeed our reverence — for productive usefulness." In the ancient feudal Europe, it was only through politics, not useful work, that a commoner could hope to rise. This tradition had hung on in Europe up to World War II. "Even in France and Britain," so Mr. Williams writes, "the aspiring commoner has long had to seek distinction less by the ladder of work than of politics." The sight of America's "economic missionaries," even those with advanced university or technical degrees, working with their hands had more effect on Europe than the Marshall Plan money. And to the extent that the Peace Corps is effective, it is through this spectacle of willingness to tackle jobs.

In Saudi Arabia, Mr. Williams notes, our engineer-managers have had trouble explaining the facts of industrial life to people who have considered that work is for

slaves. But when desert nomads are turned into skilled drillers, refiners, and transporters of oil, "the dynamics of expectation" are transformed. Commoners discover they can hope to "climb to honor" through useful work as well as through politics.

The worst thing about the Great Society is the way it has increased the growth of self-pity. This is at the crux of Mr. Williams' worries about our future. The older America which he knew, whether it was the America of coal mines and steel mills or the America of flophouses, indulged very little in "the sin of self-pity."

The Road Back to Self-Respect

How are we to get "America's Mainspring" to working again? Mr. Williams lists the obstacles that stand in the way of a return to the older verities. He fears that in the Great Society "more recognition and honor will go to elected managers as the distributors of gifts and less to the producers of goods and services." And, since "leaders dependent on votes" prefer to deal less with individuals than with manageable groups such as "farmers, wage-earners, the sick, the elderly, or whatever," the individual's work-based "Expectation Quotient" will be sacrificed to his "collective security—or, as in Europe, to his

political career." Relief appropriations, so Mr. Williams observes, must be handled with almost supernatural wisdom or they end up by discouraging industrial productivity as "smart group wangling" takes over. The welfare state tends to cannibalistic consumption of its own taxpayers. Meanwhile, since the incumbent officials are in a position to promise most, the tendency is toward perpetuation of one-party government. This one-party government, finding it more and more difficult to raise taxes, goes in for perpetual inflation. To preserve its

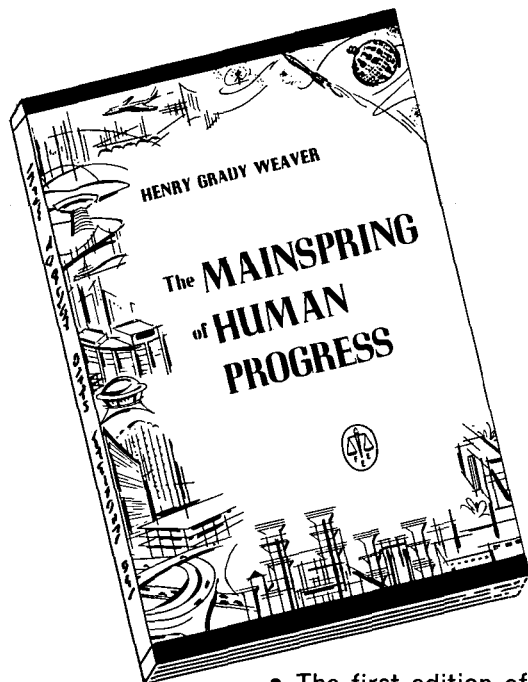
sovereignty against increasingly "dangerous" criticism as the inflation strikes home, government is then tempted to expand its control over communications and opinion.

And so we go to perdition. Mr. Williams is reminded of the kind-hearted man who, when his dog begged a bite of meat during a terrible famine, gave the animal a juicy slice of its own tail. This is what the welfare state comes to in the end, once the "main-spring" of "worth through work" has been snapped. ♦

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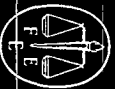
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THIS WAY TO CHAOS

■ However sympathetic we may feel toward those who say that the way to determine the fairness or validity of a law is to violate it or disobey it, nevertheless, I must conclude that a society in which each of us, or any one of us is free to choose whatever law or laws he will obey is a society destined to chaos, leaving no possibility for survival of the ideal of equal opportunity and equality before the law which we so earnestly profess.

KARL C. WILLIAMS, Chairman of the Board
of Trustees, Rockford College

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