

# Our Task in an "Affluent Society"

by ROBERT MAJOR

IT IS not quite clear what affluent society is and what country can rightly be called affluent. The rapid progress in industrialized countries and their growing capacity to produce has weakened the general interest in proposals for building a just society, chiefly because—whether our society is really affluent or not—many people believe it is.

Inhabitants of such countries now have a higher average "purchasing power" than before, and look on their economic future less gloomily than did their fathers. The Marxist theory of pauperization of the exploited majority has been discredited even among Communists; and the Georgists too must reappraise the truth of progress *with* poverty. Our program and the strategy to realize it depends on this; but the primary reason for reappraisal is a moral one, not a scientific one.

Is the economic picture as rosy in every aspect as we are told? Nobody believes that the moral defects of the system we are living under have been eliminated. Land monopoly, unjust taxation, state interference in the individual's domain and hindrances to free trade, still prevail. If, in spite of these moral defects, society's problems could be solved, poverty eliminated, exploitation ended and self-determination restored, that would mean that a good society could be built upon an immoral basis. Such a notion contradicts our moral sense and logic.

To solve this dilemma, we must first observe the facts of socio-economic life, to avoid fallacies both of its detractors and propagandists. Without enumerating the details, all of us know that poverty is the perennial fate of millions, and the recurrent distress of many others. Though workers can buy

more commodities than before, they still suffer from social insecurity despite their "social security," and they still fear sickness, old age and unemployment—perhaps more than employees did a hundred years ago. And it is also true, that *relative* poverty has not lessened—the concentration of wealth in a few hands is proceeding, and the economic dependence of the masses in the U.S. is approaching the low level existing in Communist countries.

In the past a country was considered rich if the majority of its citizens enjoyed a certain stability, along with freedom from want and fear of the future. We are progressing in the opposite direction. George taught that the growth of the population and of production continuously increases the value of land, compelling the great landless majority to pay an ever growing price for being allowed to live and to produce on it; hence, the owners of land are getting richer and richer while all the others are getting, absolutely or, at least relatively, poorer and poorer. The phenomenal economic growth of the industrial countries has not invalidated this Georgian truth.

And if we take a look at governmental services, we see that public needs are as pressing as private needs. That federal and local authorities are incapable of rendering services in such quantity and quality as the population expects is an increasing complaint. There is deterioration and degeneration in many fields. All that is visible, according to the best experts of American life, in the richest and mightiest country, is decidedly remote from general affluence. And the more the world's productive capacities increase, the more dismal is this lack of true,

real affluence. Already in Marx's times the ability to produce was so great that poverty had to be regarded as a consequence of an evil social system; that was what induced Marx to construe the theory of a new social system. Today, when the per capita productive capacity is many times greater, the presence of poverty, blight and economic insecurity, even in the wealthiest countries, is more disgraceful than it was in Marx's times, a hundred years ago, and can be explained only as a result of the unsound and

immoral basis of our social system.

There is, however, no reason to renounce our goal, namely, elimination of the basic injustice in our social system which prevents our society from becoming affluent. We do not regard our work as superfluous or hopeless—on the contrary, we believe that so many evils in a potentially affluent world must, through George's interpretation, convince public opinion that a sound and just reform is needed now more than ever to sweep them away.

## A Salute to "Challenge"

The current crop of college students is notorious for its passivity and absence of idealistic fervor. It strives primarily for security, and is appallingly lacking in the spirit of adventurous commitment. Most observers attribute this phenomenon to the disillusionment born of several decades of "hot and cold running wars."

These impressions are documented in a survey of college teachers conducted by the Nation (March 9, 1957) on 16 campuses ranging from Stanford University to Princeton, and including institutions of all sizes, both public and private. With monotonous regularity the same remarks recur:

"Quiet enervation. . . ." ". . . acknowledge no heroes, profess only lukewarm admirations, shun causes. . . ." "Sceptical, indifferent. . . ." ". . . detached. . . ." "Passivity, indifference. . . ." "Timid, unadventurous and conforming. . . . Accept the opinions of their professors."

If these attitudes are typical at Stanford, Yale and Princeton, they are even more typical at the state colleges, where most students hold down full or part time jobs, and commute to the campus for the sake of the increased earning power associated with a degree. The average state college student of today is a sober, plodding individual. In this respect, San Diego State College is no exception.

No faculty can cure this disease. Its cure must come among the students themselves. And at last an encouraging sign has appeared in the form of "Challenge," a student movement which is springing up on campuses across the nation for the purpose of arousing interest in and concern for vital issues. It does this by sponsoring debates and discussions on significant controversial topics, but it does not take sides.

Shortly after "Challenge" organized an active chapter at San Diego State College, it sponsored a debate between Tom Lanphier and Admiral Leslie E. Gehres on the subject of national defense. This debate drew an audience of 12,000.

The weekly business meetings and discussion sessions have been held at Henry George House, and never had the privilege of associating with as keen and perceptive a group of students, although I taught school for four years before coming to San Diego.

In the fall, "Challenge" will present such topics as "Should the Income Tax Be Abolished?" and "Individualism vs. Collectivism." When college students spontaneously address themselves to subjects such as these, there is reason to be hopeful that the barriers of dull conformity are finally being breached, and that a new era of student vitality and enthusiasm will soon be under way.

—Robert V. Andelson