

SINCE writing her first book *Diet For A Small Planet* in 1971, Frances Moore Lappé has devoted her efforts to reshaping the way Americans perceive their values about hunger and poverty. *Diet for a Small Planet* demonstrated how individual decisions, even the most basic, such as what we eat at the evening dinner, can prolong hunger.

Her next book, *Food First* (written with Joseph Collins) cleared the air of many of the hunger myths, particularly the old Malthusian belief that people are hungry because there are insufficient resources. A recent *Food First Alert* explains how the rain forest in Brazil is being destroyed as a result of the government's inability (or refusal) to discourage holding large tracts of underdeveloped land by a few wealthy families. The government encourages poor peasants to go to marginal lands in the rain forest instead.

Lappé thus makes clear in her writings that hunger could be avoided if governments and individuals changed their habits. *Food First* detailed how governments enforce hunger and poverty by permitting land monopoly and by refusing to share power with citizen communities. Lappé's forte is to bring fresh insights to continuing problems and to establish the connection between the lack of democracy (ie. control over your own life and the right to life sustaining resources) and hunger. "Hunger is the ultimate sign of powerlessness. It is a screaming siren telling us that something is terribly amiss in the social order," she wrote persuasively in the *Christian Century*.

A few years ago, Lappé decided that the work of *Food First* was not enough. Despite ample world food supplies "the hunger problem has worsened." From her personal journey to discover why hunger exists in America, "a society built upon freedom, fairness, and democracy," she wrote *Rediscovering America's Values*.

As she says in the opening of her book, "to ask the biggest questions it often helps to start

REDISCOVERING AMERICA'S VALUES
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Two-voiced challenger

By E. ROBERT SCROFANI

with the most personal. And what could be more personal than food?... food is a basic human need... if people aren't eating, little else matters....Hunger became my measuring rod... my first test of a political or economic system would be whether or not all of its people are eating."

Discovering America's Values is an animated dialogue in which Lappé speaks with two voices; the voice of the classical liberal who views government as a necessary evil, and proposes that "the government which governs least governs best," and her own voice. Lappé presents the view of the modern liberal (or progressive) who sees the government's role as one that must serve all the people, in our society. Her view reflects the Jeffersonian perspective embodied in the agrarian and community-based movement in our history.

Readers will find the introduction a challenging review of the dominant liberal (i.e. the free market conservative) tradition, which since the 17th century has powered the thought processes and the productive energies of the Western world. This tradition, which says "our individual self-seeking turns the wheels of the economy to the ultimate benefit of everyone," the individual

has prior claim to all goods as they are produced or exchanged with little or nothing 'left' over for society as a whole."

While acknowledging that the Liberal tradition (combined with Western religion) gave us a belief in the innate worth of the individual and the modern concepts of human rights and civil liberties she believes it is "now a set of unquestioning beliefs... which bind our creativity."

REDISCOVERING America's Values could easily form the basis for a philosophy or government and economics course. It is a great primer for those who want to consider their values in the 20th century. In fact Lappé appeals with her readers to join her in a mutual search for America's values.

She chose a propitious time for her book which emerges during the prolonged bicentennial celebrations for the Constitution, the founding of Congress and the Bill of Rights.

The dialogues are short, readable, sometimes provocative and sometimes frustrating. Some sections present the progressive viewpoint less forcefully, thus the dialogue may be somewhat skewed to the more conservative end. Perhaps Lappé is attempting to be so fair that she gives more strength to arguments for the other side.

While she makes the case for

the community, she is less effective in asserting that those of us who strive to be individuals also rely on the community. The reality is the collective, not the individual. We are born into a family and into the community. Even those among us who attain riches do so in the context of the community, and rely on the community – its military, its police, its moral restraints – to protect us so that we can live rich as well, within the safety generated by the community.

She makes clear that capitalism works in the West, because it was modified by the moral principles of the Judeo-Christian religions. But religion has receded in importance and the emphasis since the '60s has been more on a personal experience of God, particularly in the evangelical sects. Instead

of doing good for others in charity as defined by St. Paul and demonstrated in our times by a Dorothy Day or Mother Theresa we have the amorphous "thousand points of light." Capitalism thus has lost much of the restraints on its greed and self-centredness.

DESPITE Lappé's full understanding of the impact of land monopoly on hunger and poverty, she makes only passing mention of land in her book. In *Christian Century* magazine she writes that "the most obvious concentration of economic power is in the form of land", but her arguments about land have no power in this book.

Her omission is even more startling since she quotes Adam Smith frequently. Adam Smith divided the world into the owners of land, labour and capi-

tal. But her discussions about property do not even distinguish land and capital – as he did. He warned in *Wealth of Nations* that "landlords seek to reap where they have not sown." Surprisingly land is not even cited in the table of contents. These are major flaws in the book.

If her work challenges us to delve into our personal and our nation's values then her work will be well done. Reading *Rediscovering America's Values* might even encourage some of us to dust off our Hobbes, Smith, George, Galbraith, Friedman and others. As one reviewer stated, "if more Americans had Lappé's willingness to subject her moral and political convictions to such searching scrutiny we would be a less divided, more moderate and more thoughtful nation."

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rental income by stealth: a process which landowners and policy-makers failed to understand. But it worked! As a result, many people found themselves trained to high levels, deploying skills that were commensurately rewarded.

True, the business cycle created periodic havoc with the labor and capital markets, reminding everyone that they could not take security for granted for too long.

Even so, many people enjoyed standards of living that their ancestors would have found impossible to imagine.

And yet.....

We now know that, despite the ability to send men to the moon, interventionist governments were not able to banish poverty from our midst. That is the perplexing feature of contemporary society that orthodox economists cannot explain.

Henry George can; he would

argue that the land market has not enjoyed the competitive dynamism alluded to by Dr Gruen in the statement quoted above. But disregarding the past, let's look at what Dr Gruen foresees for the future: he warns that, unless the supply of land is now increased, "and soon, Henry George's failed predictions of increasing poverty in the 20th century may turn out to be valid for the 21st century."

IN MY view, the land market continued to exercise a baleful influence over the industrial economy throughout the past 100 years: it was the single major structural defect that caused the booms (through periodic bouts of land speculation) and the slumps.

Henry George provided a theory of business cycles that can teach us far more than all the econometric models that have been constructed in the past few years, the authors of

which have received Nobel Prizes but have yet to demonstrate a capacity to solve the substantial problems of the real world.

The elevation of living standards for a part of the community has been accomplished by the erosion of individual liberty, by the necessary compliance with an authoritarian form of democracy. This acceptance of a less than perfect democracy was necessary (we can now see, in retrospect) for the sake of challenging the powerful class that could not be challenged head-on: the landowners who contributed nothing in return for their claim on a portion of the income that was produced by labour and capital. This created a politics based on social conflict, the costs of which have been enormous.

Nonetheless, the historic possibilities of a transformation to a civilized social and economic system are now before us. Will they be grasped this time?