



The BOOK TRAIL

FASCINATING ECONOMICS

"The God of the Machine," by Isabel Patterson. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1943. 292 pp. \$2.75

This book is described as "a study of the flow of energy and the nature of government as mechanism." Its author is Isabel Patterson, whose "Turns With a Bookworm" in *The New York Herald-Tribune Weekly Book Review* has delighted hosts of readers by the skill and dexterity with which she flattens professional dogooders, shiny-eared lifter-uppers, members of the state-can-do-it-better persuasion and other phonies. Mrs. Patterson has produced a near masterpiece, as different from the usual conglomeration of bunk, crap, hoakum, baloney and politics that masquerades under the guise of economics as Thomas Jefferson is different from a New Deal democrat—than which few things could be different.

In tracing what she terms "The long circuit of energy," the author begins in the fourth century B.C., when the Phoenicians were the master traders of the world, and "tin from Cornwall, furs and amber from the Baltic were staple cargo, delivered to the markets of the East for the profit of Carthage." Things weren't so different in those days. "The series of wars which run through the story of the Phoenicians makes a geographical pattern resembling the track of a hurricane, a cyclonic flow of energy continuing for almost a thousand years, and moving irresistibly along the midland waterway between the great continents of classical antiquity, Asia, Africa and Europe."

The government of ancient Rome, the Rome that ruled the world, was in the beginning "the first demonstration of the axiom that the country which is least governed is best governed," but later "The functions of the bureaucracy increased and the number of officials multiplied. More and more of the flow was converted from production into the political mechanism." The bureaucrats came down on the producers—with a planned economy. "Farmers were bound to the soil; craftsmen to their workbenches; tradesmen were ordered to continue in business although the taxes and regulations did not permit them to make a living. The currency was debased; prices and wages fixed." Still not so different from today.

As to government planning, we are told that "Only the most meager economy—coarse diet, manual labor, the minimum of comfort, convenience and pleasure—can be adjusted to a planned economy; for a planned economy cannot even be imagined except under po-

litical subjection. . . The imposition of political power over production instantly begins to reduce the economy to primitive methods."

The highly interesting chapter, "The Fallacy of Anarchism," is strewn with gems for the student of government. "Anarchy is practicable only to savagery . . . The essence of self-government consists in keeping promises . . . Government by force is a contradiction in terms and an impossibility in physics. *Force is what is governed.* Government originates in the moral faculty . . . Force cannot compel obedience in the social order . . . What it can effect is death, whether of subject or king. Where force is arbiter, government ceases."

The leadership principle evokes the author's heartfelt and enthusiastic disapproval. "In a settled and productive society," she writes, "leadership is completely impracticable . . ." When leadership is attempted, "what can happen is a degenerate and temporary manifestation, the rule of popularity, by which the permanent institutions are subverted to make the leader irremovable." We are warned that "When the word leader, or leadership, returns to current use, it connotes a relapse into barbarism. For a civilized people, it is the most ominous word in any language."

Mrs. Patterson holds that "Government is solely the instrument or mechanism of appropriation, prohibition, compulsion and extinction; in the nature of things it can be nothing else," a view which will bring howls of derision from certain quarters in Washington, where plans for extension of office and expansion of government functions through a fourth term are well under way. But while the bureaucrats won't like it, they will have a whale of a time refuting the argument.

The oft-quoted declaration of Proudhon, 19th century Socialist, that "All property is theft," is called "the most senseless phrase ever coined by a collectivist . . . in four words it confuses objects, acts, attributes, moral values and relations, as if they were interchangeable. Theft presupposes rightful ownership. An object must be property *before* it can be stolen."

Still on the socialist theme, she adds: "There is no collective good. Strictly speaking there is not even any common good . . . the greatest good of the greatest number is a vicious phrase . . . Misuse of language is the means by which the Marxist cult of Communism has done the most serious injury to intelligence . . . The confusion and vagueness of terms always found in collectivist theories is not accidental; it is a reversion to the mental and verbal limitations of the primitive it advocates, the inability to think in abstract terms . . . The phrase 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is a contradiction in terms. It has no meaning . . . the theory of 'dialectical materialism' is a misuse of terms . . . Marx was a fool with a large vocabulary of long words . . . Marx's theory of class war is utter nonsense by its own definition; it has no reference to either class or war, if it relates to 'capital' and 'labor.' "

Seldom have I read a book so filled with thought-provoking passages. For instance, "It may be said that at any time when finance is under attack through the

political authority, it is an infallible sign that the political authority is already exercising too much power over the economic life of the nation through manipulation of finance, whether by exorbitant taxation, uncontrolled expenditure, unlimited borrowing or currency depreciation." And here is one that Congress might note: "Neither does increased taxation of the rich lower the rate of taxation on the poor; it is bound to cause an increase in all taxation, reaching down inchmeal until it expropriates a portion, not merely of the last dollar of a poor man, but of the first dollar he can earn." Calling the present tax on wages the "Social Security Swindle," the author claims that "There is no means by which 'the rich' can be taxed without ultimately taxing the poor far more heavily."

Anti-trust laws are called freak legislation; no one knows what they forbid, and it is impossible for the citizen to know beforehand whether he is committing a crime. "If government is morally competent to prohibit the sale of intoxicating liquor, it must have power to prescribe every item of diet to citizens."

Of today we are told: "Once again it is deemed a crime to work, a crime to produce . . . Already the primary right of human beings to mere existence has been denied; since farm quotas, priorities, and ration cards cover all the processes of production and exchange, by which existence is supported, life is made to depend upon daily and hourly permission."

The chapters on Money, Credit and Depressions, and Our Japanized Educational System—wait till our public school officials read that one!—are worth a review each. Mrs. Patterson enjoys the rare faculty of being able to think through to a conclusion with admirable logic. And she exercises that faculty beautifully—most of the time. But occasionally she nods. She poses the question: "But is it true that the unemployed are in this condition because they are denied access to land?" Then she proceeds with an answer that outdoes Proudhon.

She writes: "But in the United States there never was a day in 'hard times' when the unemployed could not have had 'access' to wild land, or even to owned land which the owner would have let them use for production. Yet in hard times men did not go into the wilderness. The statement that the land frontier took up the slack of unemployment during industrial depressions is a wholecloth falsehood. On the contrary, the frontier was settled from the capitalistic production overflow of good times. During hard times men withdrew from the frontier, even abandoning homesteads, and turned back toward the area of more advanced development, the town and industrial regions. They looked for wage jobs."

The fact is, of course, that there is no longer any "wild" land of use and fertility in the United States, and hasn't been for years. As to access to "owned land," that could only have happened so infrequently as to have no place in the argument. It means nothing that a farmer here and there—presumably farm land is meant since "production" is mentioned—found the going so tough that he was willing to let some other

Henry George was a master of English, one of the greatest that ever used a pen. His was a wonderful mind; he saw a question from every side; his philosophy appealed to every school. Henry George wrote a profound book, the first book on political economy that people may read; the first, and perhaps the last, that was readable by plain ordinary men.

CLARENCE DARROW

fellow step in and have a try at it for a while. During the glorious 'thirties tens of thousands of unemployed furriers walked the streets of New York City and never heard of such a farm, and wouldn't have known how to get there or what to do if they had. Did they have "access to land?" Was a single one of them offered a rent-free lot right in New York City where he could set up in business for himself? You may be sure that he was not.

It is not true that "In hard times men did not go into the wilderness." From the landing of the Mayflower on, men never ceased to go into the wilderness—as long as there was a wilderness—in good times and bad, always hoping to better themselves and usually doing it. A forebear of my own, Captain Ninian Steele, left the Jamestown settlement in Virginia many years before the Revolution, and struck out west into the wilderness. He didn't go because he was out of a job; no one was out of a job in those days. Life was hard; every one had to work and no one was very rich. But neither was any one very poor, and no one had to run around begging for work, while such a thing as an able-bodied man having to stand idly by and see his family suffer because he could not get a job was simply unknown. Thanks to the accessibility of land, there were jobs for everybody.

One of Captain Ninian Steele's sons followed the example of his father; he went over the mountains with Daniel Boone. And his sons and his sons' sons followed suit. They kept on going into the wilderness until one of them hit California—that was my own father. If they weren't always seeking free land, they were at least heading for territory where land was freer and—the invariable accompaniment—work was more plentiful and wages higher. And my folks didn't go alone; there were countless thousands of others.

The author's statement that "The frontier was settled from the capitalistic production overflow of good times," means exactly and precisely nothing. Production is wealth; it results from the application, directly or indirectly, of labor on land, assisted practically always by capital in the shape of tools, machinery, plant equipment, etc. To say that this inanimate thing called wealth settled a frontier is childish. Men settled the frontier, seeking to escape unemployment or to find better jobs

than they had at home, just as they would be doing today if there were any frontier.

"During hard times men withdrew from the frontier . . . they looked for wage jobs." Of course they did, just as men, seeking to gratify their desires with the least effort, have always hopped around, hoping to better their condition. When things get tough a man looks for a better spot. Many a man has found himself in a position for which he was not fitted. Without a doubt there were always some men, in good times and bad, withdrawing from the frontier for one reason or another. But Mrs. Patterson completely refutes her own argument when she says, "They looked for wage jobs." That is merely another way of saying that *they did not retire to idleness in preference to remaining on the frontier*; "They looked for wage jobs," which knocks the implication that they preferred unemployment to life "in the wilderness" into a cocked hat.

Even so, the recitation of individual experiences means little. The full significance of the statement that unemployment results from the denial of access to land will become clearer when it is realized that if economic rent—the annual site value of land, whether urban or rural—were collected in lieu of taxes of every kind, land would no longer be held idle in the hope of speculative gain. No one would pay \$1,000 a year, say, to hold in idleness a lot or a farm which formerly might have been valued around \$20,000 if he knew that he would never be able to sell it at any price, much less at an advance over \$20,000.

All unused land would therefore come onto the market, available for the mere payment of economic rent. To say that men would sit down and starve rather than make use of the land for the production of food, clothing and shelter, when it might be had merely for the payment of economic rent, is to predict the occurrence of something that has never happened in all history. That widespread unemployment could persist while opportunities for profitable employment abounded on every hand just isn't in the cards, the brilliant Mrs. Patterson to the contrary notwithstanding.

But "The God of the Machine" is still a magnificent book!

—C. O. STEELE