

A BETTER LIFE

IN AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY

1. Contemporary society is preoccupied with wealth. There is no need here to distinguish between capitalism and communism. It is a well-known fact that the great declared objective of Soviet economic planning is "to attain and to surpass the American standard of life."

Every country employs statisticians to compute the annual increase in its national wealth. If the increase is substantial, the government prides itself on it; if it is small, the opposition finds in it a grievance capable of rallying public opinion behind it. In democratic countries, the political organizations that are most firmly entrenched are the ones that seek to advance the pretensions of one group for a larger share of the national wealth, and those that seek to defend the present share of a group against such pretensions. Public affairs consist to a large extent of pleadings

Translated by H. Kaal.

and pressures concerning the division of wealth, and to some extent of more technical discussions concerning its increase.

The United States, which is at present the wealthiest country, provides the ideal which all other countries seek to attain. It is therefore natural to arrange other countries on a scale according to the distance that separates the average wealth of their inhabitants from the average wealth of an American. The most forceful argument which is produced nowadays in favor of collectivism is that economic planning is the most rapid method for advancing on that scale.

2. All this is familiar enough—so much so that we must gain distance if we are to find it surprising and thus, make it a subject for philosophical reflection. This is easily done. Whether we look at the philosophers of ancient Greece, or at the prophets and priests of Israel, or at the authors of ancient Rome, we find that every one of them condemns the individual's passion for wealth and warns us of the corruption that results from a general state of prosperity. There are great differences in tone between them: Some would have man renounce worldly possessions altogether, and live in as great a state of poverty as is compatible with bare survival; but these constitute only a minority. The majority approve of modest comfort, but recommend that man confine his desires to that. Both these attitudes can be found in Christian morality: To the few it offers the vow of poverty; to the many it preaches the moderation of desires.

There is no better witness to the fact that the desire for wealth has always existed, and always been indulged in to some extent, than the fact that it has always been denounced. The desire for wealth is natural, and at times it has been indulged in by the very people who denounced it. Thus Seneca the Elder wrote his epistles condemning luxury in surroundings of great personal luxury.

What is new is not that men desire wealth, but that the satisfaction of their desire has become the major aim of government, and the dominant concern of intellectuals. For a long time, the role of government was thought to be to oppose the concentration of wealth and to preserve among the people an austere morality, while the proper concern of intellectuals was thought

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to be with goods other than temporal ones. What is new is that wealth has suddenly become respectable.

The attitude of governments has certainly changed from complacency about the prosperity of some to concern with the prosperity of all. This change should not be attributed to socialist ideas; for the principles of socialism did not aim at collective prosperity. What they aimed at was the creation of a society free from internal strife—of a true community. The current of thought and sentiment that may be called “socialism” was diverted by another powerful current: the idea that prosperity as such was a good thing. It is in this way that contemporary socialism, in the form it assumed in Soviet Russia, has become more “chrematistic” than “communal.”

The word “chrematistic,” which was used just now, was, I believe, coined by Sismondi. It designates the science of wealth, which has become, in some measure, the master science of contemporary society.

3. The appearance of Rousseau's *Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts* was a great event in the history of social thought. The scandal created by his thesis shows what the attitudes of his contemporaries were. In this great exercise in rhetoric, which was his first work, Rousseau may not have aimed his guns properly. But his contemporaries were never in doubt as to what the core of his thesis was, namely, that the gradual change of needs, away from their natural state, was an evil. Hence, in opposition to the mass of classical and Christian literature, public opinion in Rousseau's time was already unshakeably convinced that such a change of needs was a good thing.

Rousseau's reply to his numerous opponents was in substance: “But I only repeated what all the classical authors said.” And their replies to this may be summarized thus: “That may be so; but nowadays we believe the contrary.”

The contrary had already been believed for a long time. Around 1620, there appeared a typical pamphlet entitled *La Chasse au viel grognart de l'Antiquité*. The unknown author¹

¹ This piece was published by Danjou and Cimber in their *Archives curieuses de l'histoire de France*, Second series, vol. 2, pp. 361-387.

contrasts in vivid terms the standard of life of his contemporaries with that of his ancestors. His narrative contains details which make the pamphlet a valuable document for the historian of the period. But it is not as such a document that it is of interest here, but rather as an indication that advances in standards of living were, as early as 1620, a fascinating topic.

To examine how this theme gained gradually in respectability, would be a task for the historian of ideas. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that the theme of rising standards of living has not always had the place it occupies now, and that the wealth of nations has not always been regarded as the principal concern of governments and of intellectuals.

4. The rise of this theme to respectability had to await the discovery that a gain in wealth is not necessarily made at the expense of others. There is a motif which runs through all classical condemnations of wealth, and which is so invariable and insistent that it cannot be overlooked: Desire without moderation is bad because a man who always satisfies his needs becomes their slave. But there is another motif which underlies and reinforces the first: In becoming the slave of his desires, a man seeks more and more power to satisfy them, and he finds this power in the employment of other men in the service of his own desires. Thus, in being enslaved by his needs, he tries to enslave other men.

Here we have an idea which has played a long and effective part in history, and which for this reason alone deserves our attention. It should be remembered first, that all ancient civilizations, as well as our own up to a certain period, have rested either on slavery or on one of the several forms of serfdom. Under the system of slavery, the master has complete control over the labor of his slaves, and the right to divide the fruits of their labor very unevenly between the gratification of his own needs and their subsistence. Under the system of serfdom, the feudal lord does not have complete control over the labor of his serfs; but they owe him part of the fruits of their labor, or part of their time, or both. Under either system, wealth is measured by the number of slaves one owns, or of serfs one controls. And under either system, it is true that wealth is acquired at the expense of others, or by the exploitation of man by man. Paradoxically enough, this idea

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was given its most effective formulation at a time when society had reached a stage in the process of transformation where the idea ceased to apply.

For hundreds or even thousands of years, the only source of wealth had been the exploitation of other men's labor. It seemed obvious that, even under the most favorable material and moral conditions, a family that had to rely on itself could only achieve a modest degree of comfort. Happy, if it knew how to content itself with the "fruits" of its labor—which is the original meaning of "frugality." The number of its arms (taking into account a certain coefficient of strength) determined the maximum extent of the land it could cultivate. To go beyond that, it would have needed slaves. It could, of course, be reduced to much less than the extent it was capable of cultivating, by having its land seized by the rich; whereas the rich, who engaged in such seizure, could only put their vast holdings to use by means of a large population of slaves or serfs. There was, therefore, what might be called an "upper limit" to the wealth of a free family without slaves; and such a family was always in danger of falling much below this level because its land was always in danger of being seized by the rich. On the other hand, the rich saw no limit to their wealth, provided there were enough slaves or serfs to do for them the necessary manual labor. Wealth was therefore based on seizure and exploitation. And it is quite natural that the desire for wealth should have been condemned, since it could only be satisfied by such means.

The wealth of nations was no less predatory in character than the wealth of individuals. Athens at the height of its achievement was not only a slave-owner's state; it also exacted heavy tributes from the numerous cities that formed part of its alliance. How much larger in scale, and how much more deplorable, was the case of Rome! If Rome passed from its original simplicity to great luxury, this was due entirely to its armies, which brought back spoils and assured tributes from all the shores of the Mediterranean. St. Augustine was not exaggerating when he said that the history of Rome was that of a band of robbers; and it is very appropriate that Brutus should be remembered as one of its heroes; for he seized property and practiced usury with such ruthlessness that he aroused the indignation of Cicero who was,

nevertheless, accustomed to the ways of the financiers of the period. Finally, it might be noted that the wealth of Rome vanished as soon as Constantine chose to spend the tributes from the Mediterranean world in Byzantium.

As long as there is a fairly constant limit to production *per capita*, one man can gain wealth only by making use of another man's labor, and, therefore, some men only can gain wealth at the others' expense. All ancient civilizations rested on the unformulated postulate of a constant productivity of labor.

I would, no doubt, be reproached if I were to omit all mention of commerce as it was practiced for thousands of years. But for the moralists this was only a minor issue. (Plato was exceptionally hostile to it.) It would take too long to explain fully why this was so; a brief sketch will therefore have to suffice. When, during the Middle Ages, Italian merchants dispatched vessels to the Levant, they received, in return for a cargo of European products, a cargo of exotic products whose sale brought them large profits over the cost of the original shipment. But the main result of this exchange of exported European goods for imported exotic ones was to bring variety into the consumption of the rich. Since the capacity of ships was small, it must have seemed to a moralist that the import of exotic goods could only *whet* the appetite for wealth in the importing country, while the only way to *satisfy* this appetite was to bring pressure to bear on others.²

The key to all this is that production *per capita* appeared to be a given constant. It is here, then, that the enormous change that has come over contemporary society is to be located. It would, of course, be wrong to say that technical progress made its ap-

² This is borne out by a passage from Montesquieu concerning Poland: "A few lords own entire provinces; they force the laborers to let them have a greater amount of grain, so they can send it abroad and procure for themselves the goods which their life of luxury demands. If Poland did not trade with any country, her people would be happier. If the great had only their grain, they would give it to their peasants to live on. Too large an estate would be a burden to them, and they would give some of it to their peasants. Since everyone would own herds which yielded hides and wool, there would no longer be enormous sums to pay for clothing. The great would still love luxury; but since they could not find it in their country, would encourage the poor to work." *L'Esprit des lois*, Book XX, ch. XXIII. Montesquieu, incidentally, is not opposed to international commerce under different conditions.

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pearance only recently; no doubt, each generation made some progress over the preceding ones, apart from certain disastrous setbacks. But it was only recently that men became aware of progress and of its acceleration, and that their awareness in turn increased the rate of acceleration.

5. The great new idea is that it is possible to enrich all the members of society, collectively and individually, by gradual progress in the organization of labor, its methods and its implements; that this enrichment provides the means for a greater development of the individual; and that this development can be rapid and unlimited.

This idea is an enormous innovation. It would have greatly surprised the ancient reformers, who were all intent on improving the material lot of the masses and the morals of society. Their views, put forward at different times and in different places, bear such a striking similarity to one another that one could paint a single portrait of them all. Such a Galtonian portrait would look like this:

First the land, whose cultivation occupied the great majority of the labor force, should be redistributed in such a way that each family owned the entire extent it was capable of cultivating. Then these rural laborers should be freed, entirely or in part, of the heavy burdens that rested on them to the profit of the privileged classes. The latter would, from then on, no longer be able to enjoy excessive luxury in the cities in which they had tended to gather; and especially, they could no longer maintain a flock of domestic servants, keeping them thus from productive labor in the fields. The artisans who had also gathered in the cities, attracted by a rich clientele, would either return to the country or work for a more prosperous peasantry, when they saw the sources of their present income dry up. Since peasant families would live in modest comfort, their heads could give more time and care to the common interests of the neighborhood, and assemblies of heads of families would form the base of a pyramidal political structure.

There is no need to emphasize how much this bucolic picture differs from the reality of contemporary society. A brief evocation of the picture is enough. But it is worth pointing out that if this

model had been realized, we could not now flaunt the growth statistics we are now used to.

6. We do not find these statistics surprising enough. The reason is, no doubt, that they are only cited for short periods, and this leads one to say things of which one does not feel the weight. A few years ago, a president of the French Council put forward, as a goal that could be attained, the doubling of the French standard of life in ten years. He surely cannot have calculated that if this rate of growth were to keep up for one hundred years, at the end of this long period, wealth *per capita*³ would have increased 867 times.

There is no need to appeal to imaginary objectives. The same point can be made by citing goals that were in fact attained. In France, production *per capita* increased, according to the most accurate figures, by 3.5 percent *per annum* in the years 1949 to 1959. This figure is not very impressive. But if this rate were to keep up for one hundred years, wealth *per capita* would have increased 31 times.

The rates that can be noted nowadays are a great novelty. The United States has become the wonder of the world by the progress in its standards of life. But according to a noted statistician,⁴ production *per capita* increased no more than seven times in the 120 years between 1839 and 1959, at the mean annual rate of 1.64 percent—a rate with which no advanced country would be content today.

Yet this rate, which appears so small nowadays, was enough to turn America's gain in wealth⁵ into something like the fairy

³ By "standard of life" is here meant "production *per capita*." The product is, of course, calculated at fixed prices.

⁴ Raymond W. Goldsmith; the paper referred to was presented, on April 7, 1959, to the Joint Economic Committee of the United States Congress, and published in its *Hearings on Employment, Growth and Price Levels*. The figures used here occur on page 271.

⁵ It should be noted that the annual growth in production was much greater than here indicated, *viz.* 3.66 percent, but also that the annual growth in population was 1.97 percent. It is *per capita* that production increased by 1.64

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tale of modern times. This shows that this rate, which appears small at present, was relatively great in the past.

It is very difficult to form an accurate picture of changes in standards of life before the nineteenth century. But if one considers this question, the impression one gains is that technical progress was slow enough for its beneficial effects to be completely offset by population increases. This is what seems to have happened in Europe in the sixteenth century;⁶ and it is, no doubt, what happened in India and China during the last three centuries.⁷

However this may be, the facts until very recent times were never striking enough to support the view, which has now become dogma, that a gain in wealth is possible for each and all, continually and at a rapid rate. This rate has even taken on an explosive character. The term "explosive" is not too strong for it. If we try to imagine some of the successive results of a rate which is supposed to keep up (e.g. 3.5 percent *per annum*), we find that we can easily enough imagine our standard of life doubled in twenty years; but its multiplication by 31 in one hundred years exceeds the imagination, and its multiplication by 961 in two hundred years no longer brings anything whatsoever to mind. We shall return to this inconceivability and to what it implies. But at the moment we should be troubled by another thought: If it is true that we are gaining wealth at such a rate, then surely we must give priority to the question of how to employ this wealth. The art of making use of human labor and of natural resources so as to produce a rapidly increasing flow of wealth, has been greatly developed. This calls for another art, that of making use of this wealth.

percent; and it is increase *per capita* that constitutes a measure of progress in standards of life.

⁶ Cf. four articles by E. H. Phelps-Brown and Sheil Hopkins in *Economica*, August 1955, November 1956, November 1957 and February 1959.

⁷ According to Abbot Payson Usher, the population of China fluctuated, since the beginning of the Christian era, between a minimum of 54 and a maximum of 79 million; only in the seventeenth century did it begin the gradual growth that brought it up to 600 million. India around 1522 had perhaps up to 100 million inhabitants, which is far less than the nearly 500 million that now inhabit the peninsula. Cf. Usher, "The History of Population and Settlement in Eurasia," *Geographical Review*, January 1930.

7. If one were to write a history of questions that have been debated, one would see how at different times different questions came alive or died. One would like to think that a question which, at a given time, is so much alive that it attracts all the thought of the moment, is the most important question for the society of the time; and that a question which is neglected is so because of its lack of real value. But it is difficult to believe this. Intellectuals resemble Rabelais's Panurge more than one would like to admit, and while many intellects combine to make a well-known problem with rapidly decreasing yields their quarry, another problem which is important for society remains unexplored. Thus the attention given to problems of productivity certainly exceeds the golden mean, while the problem of "the good life" suffers from neglect.

In speaking of productivity, we think, no doubt, of gain in wealth as its end. But gain in wealth has in turn its end, and this is the good life. There is no need here, I believe, to discuss the extreme view, that a gain in wealth is indifferent to the good life. This doctrine is respectable enough when taught by saints who live according to it; but it is scandalous when taught by men who enjoy most of the comforts of life. I here take it to be certain that a gain in wealth contributes to the good life. But should one, for all that, subscribe to the view which is at the opposite extreme, that a gain in wealth is identical with a better life, so that the only sense we could attach to the idea of a better life would be that of being richer? If this doctrine were true, two men who were equally wealthy would, by definition, live equally well. But suppose one of us were asked to observe two or more wealthy men with equal incomes, and to say afterwards which of them led the best life. None of us would reply that the question was devoid of sense, when thus asked, in practice, to pass a value judgement, and none of us would hesitate to make distinctions. Since we are naturally inclined to take into account a man's generosity to his fellows, I will restrict the question by supposing that the degree of generosity is the same for all the men we observe, and that we only have to take into account the use each man makes of his wealth to better the life of his family. Again, we would not hesitate to say that the use which one man made was superior to the use made by

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another, or that means which were equally large were used to create lives which were not equally good. This brief psychological experiment shows that the problem of "deriving the best possible life from a given increase in wealth" is by no means a false problem. It can even be said that this problem can be posed in the same terms as the problem of productivity. In the case of the latter, we can ask: "Given a certain increase in the factors available for production, how can this increase be made to yield the greatest possible increase in production?" In the case of our problem, we can ask: "Given a certain increase in the products available for human life, how can this increase be made to yield the greatest possible improvement in human life?" What is output for the problem of productivity, is input for the problem of the good life.

We are not dealing, as has been shown, with a false problem. But we are dealing with a problem of extreme difficulty, as will be seen.

8. At first sight, the problem appears to be quite simple. For we are tempted to treat the case of increasing wealth for all families in a progressive society, by assimilating it to the case of increasing wealth for a single family in a static society. Given a family *A* whose income is 100 at the present time; we tell them that their income (real purchasing power) will be 200 in twenty years, 300 in 32 years, 400 in 40 years, 500 in 47 years, and 600 in 52 years.⁸ It is then quite natural to suppose that this family can, in 47 years, live in the way a family does at the present time whose income is five times as high. There are at present a great many different ways of life among families whose income is five times the income of family *A*. We can call the attention of family *A* to what seems to us to be the best way of life in "the fivefold class." But we can do more: The families in the fivefold class occupy social positions which are superior to that of family *A*, and they have duties attached, either by necessity or by vanity, to their superior position. Hence our hypothesis is that family *A* will increase its income five times without any corresponding rise

⁸ These calculations are based on the rate of progress of 3.5 percent *per annum*, which was mentioned above.

in the social structure. There is, therefore, no good reason why this family should assume the duties which rest at present on the families in the fivefold class. Thus, family *A* may not only live as well as does at present the wisest of the families in the fivefold class; it may live much better, if it does not assume the duties of that class.

This way of looking at things is the one that naturally comes to mind when we start thinking about the problem of increasing wealth. But does this picture not mislead us? If it does not, then it must be said that the wealth acquired by an overall increase during the last two hundred years has been very badly used. Suppose we conjure up the spirits of the Marquis de Mirabeau, de Quesnay and de Turgot, and we announce to this tribunal that the wealth *per* Frenchman has, in two centuries, increased sevenfold (an arbitrary figure). If they knew only this figure which, incidentally, would seem improbably high to them, they would suppose that life in 1960 had an ease, a sweetness and a charm about it which are neither noted by present-day observers nor felt by the interested parties. If we could press the spirits to add details to their supposition, their descriptions would make us feel ashamed of the use to which we have put our increased wealth. Hence, if I am correct in thinking that value judgements can be passed on the use of increased wealth (and this is the inspiration of this paper), it must be admitted that the problem cannot be treated as it has just been sketched. It cannot be supposed that wealth as we measured it had increased as we calculated it, if quite different choices determined its use. The progress in standards of life for families in general cannot be conceived, as we did just now, in a *vertical* fashion—as if each family came to have at a given moment the same resources as a family with greater wealth at a preceding moment. Rather, this progress must be conceived as *oblique*—so that an income of 500 in the year 47 is still five times an income of 100 in the year zero, but is nevertheless not the same thing as an income of 500 in the year zero. Finally and above all, the use of increased wealth cannot be discussed in abstraction from its conditions.

9. The conditions of increased wealth have been, and are, draconic. First and foremost among these conditions must be placed the

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mobility of labor, in several senses of the phrase: A man must be ready to change his way of working, his occupation and his place of residence; he must be ready to do otherwise, to do other things and to live elsewhere.

He must be ready to do otherwise; for if he were always to proceed in the same way, he would always produce the same amount in the same time and thus fail to do his share to increase the flow of commodities. He must be ready to change his occupation; for an increase in the total flow of commodities is not, and cannot be, achieved by simply multiplying by a certain constant each of the specific currents of which the total flow is composed at a given moment. He must be ready to move elsewhere; for increased production demands continual changes in the way the labor force is divided.

Metal production obviously would not be what it is if it were still carried on by tiny work crews, around furnaces in which the minerals were melted over a charcoal fire, fanned by the wind or a pair of bellows; and metal work obviously would not be what it is if it were still in the hands of village smiths. There is no need to expand on what everybody knows. But it should be emphasized that a society, in the course of increasing its wealth, constantly calls the individual from the place where he happens to be to a place where he will contribute more to production. This is indeed an imperative of productivity, and it might even be called its essential imperative.

This imperative calls for a reversal of all social values: That a man should have roots in one part of the world; that he should be attached to it because this is where the tombs of his ancestors are, the memories of his childhood and youth, the ties of blood and friendship, and in short, his loves and his duties; this has always been judged to be good, at all times and by all men. But it has now become an evil because it conflicts with the demands of productivity. The man who was firmly rooted in his soil and tied by blood and friendship to his neighbors was always the paradigm of a good citizen. He has now become a recalcitrant producer.

Stability used to be so highly regarded that at one time the main argument in favor of emigration was that it helped to rid

the country of unruly elements, and thus to preserve general stability.

Since the peasantry is stable *par excellence*, it was traditionally regarded as the very backbone of a nation. The Latin authors were unanimous in attributing the decay of morals to the decline of the free peasantry, and to the migration to the cities of country people who had given up agriculture, discouraged by robbery, debts and the import of foreign grain. Nowadays the migration of the peasantry to the cities is regarded as the very condition of economic progress. In England, this migration took place in the first half of the nineteenth century, and it is this migration which Soviet economic planners are seeking to speed up. The countries that have emerged in turn as the forerunners of the new society, namely, England and the United States, pride themselves on having only a very small and gradually decreasing part of their population engaged in farming. And French economists deplore the fact that our fields still retain a much too large proportion of our working population.

Whereas the free peasantry used to be regarded as the healthiest part of a nation, it is now looked upon as its backward element. As late as the eighteenth century, the prime concern of social reformers was to guarantee and to extend the possessions of the peasantry,⁹ and to free the peasants of obligations that oppressed them.¹⁰ Nowadays the main concern of reformers is to diminish the number of peasant families.

But peasants are not the only people who are attached to the place in which they live. In the British as well as in the French press, one reads from time to time of the outcries raised

⁹ This goal was persistently pursued in France during the eighteenth century. It inspired the ordinance of Chancellor d'Aguesseau against the extension of the rights of mortmain. It also inspired the decrees of the Revolution that abolished these rights altogether—though by decreeing that a peasant's holdings were to be divided equally among his heirs, the revolutionaries violated all the principles of economics and did great damage to the progress of agriculture and the welfare of the population.

¹⁰ This is illustrated by the abolition of all feudal rights during the French Revolution.

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by miners or industrial workers against the management's decision to close their mine or plant. It may seem to be enough to guarantee these workers reemployment in a different location. But this is to count for nothing the attachment men feel for the place in which they live. This attachment is all the more striking when the place offers to the outside observer no visible attractions whatsoever.

If men become attached to the place in which they live, they also become attached to their occupation and to a certain way of practicing it. The attachment to methods was evident in the case of the artisan: His great pride was the method taught him by a master. But his traditional method had to give way to newer and more productive methods, which are, moreover, constantly changing. Even in the United States, in industries as far removed as possible from the practices of the artisan, the workers show great defiance when any changes in work rules are proposed that would alter the composition of their crews.¹¹

The mobility of labor, the *sine qua non* of productivity, is to my mind a topic of immense importance. But I cannot develop it further here. Let me, therefore, just emphasize that the growth of roots, or the attachment to, and love of, a place, an occupation and a method, which were once taken for attitudes that were good for society, are nowadays taken for attitudes that are bad for the economy; and that the virtues of stability and faithfulness to the past are now considered vices. The individual in a productive society must be a docile nomad, ready to go wherever the goal of the greatest possible productivity directs him. One might note here a moral paradox: For what is demanded of the resident of the City of Productivity is, in short, a certain capacity for detachment from temporal bonds, which is also required of the mystic. However, the former is rewarded for his detachment, not by an abundance of spiritual goods, but by a profusion of temporal ones.

10. In a society of men who are essentially displaceable, the notion of "morals" has no longer the sense it had for the classical authors, and it could no longer have it. The ancients thought of

¹¹ This theme played a major part in the American steel dispute of 1959.

good morals as consisting essentially of faithfulness to the best examples set by one's ancestors. If I want to picture to myself good morals as they were formerly conceived, I think of a certain artisan of my acquaintance who, in the same place, practices with love and minute care the art his family had practiced for several generations; he cannot be tempted by novel products, and his great passion is to collect beautiful specimens of his art. Under the old system, such a man would be a model to his neighbors; but in reality, he is considered by them something of a character and treated almost as a stranger. Far from being influential in his neighborhood by reason of his virtue, he is never listened to because of his different point of view; and when he speaks out against the broadening of the street in order to preserve its charm, it is said (and this is true) that he does not own a car.

In a productive society, the individual must not only, in his role as producer, learn to look for the employment in which he can make the greatest contribution to the total product; he must also, in his role as consumer, learn to buy the commodities that are offered to him at decreasing costs. It is misleading to measure an increase in wealth by first taking the typical or the average income of an individual or a family, by then noting how much this income has increased in terms of current monetary units, and by finally dividing this increase by a cost-of-living index in order to arrive, by such a division, at a so-called "real" increase. For this is hardly the effective increase, except for the rare or even non-existent individual whose expenditures have in fact remained distributed in the way in which the items in the index are distributed. Following Jean Fourastié, we can obtain a much more significant measure, by taking the typical or the average income, expressed in terms of current monetary units, as our point of reference, and by dividing the price of each item by this nominal income. Increase in wealth will then no longer appear as a single "real" increase in income, but in the form of a multitude of real reductions in price, each different from each. The divergence between these real reductions is enormous. Thus, in less than fifty years, the price of electricity for household purposes, expressed in terms of a worker's salary, has fallen to four percent of what it was, and the price of a bed with a metal frame to 25 percent, while the price of crystal glasses has, on the contrary,

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risen by 50 percent.¹² It is then clear that, of two families whose incomes have grown in the same way, the one that looked for its consumption to articles whose real prices were decreasing, derived from this a feeling of increased wealth which was much more pronounced than that of the other family, which looked for its consumption to articles whose real prices decreased but little, or remained the same, or even increased.

This brings us back to the point that increase in wealth is not vertical but oblique. If a workingman's family had, in 1760, conceived the ambition of living in the way a certain family, ten times richer, lived at the time, and if it had remained obsessed with this ambition, it could not realize it when the statistician told the family that its wealth had now multiplied by ten. It could not build the same house, and obviously could not have the same servants.¹³ Our family cannot enjoy the luxury or even the comfort of yesterday; but it can enjoy the abundance of today: a profusion of light and a rapidity of locomotion which a comfortable or wealthy family could not obtain formerly. Our family will congratulate itself on the improvement of its lot to the exact extent that its tastes run to what has become easy to obtain; and it will deny this improvement to the extent that its tastes remain with what is *not* easier to obtain. In other words, that family improves its fortune most which is the most *opportunist* in its tastes. And if there was, in general, no opportunism of tastes in our society, there could be no progress; for the products which could be offered at rapidly decreasing real prices could not find a market that expanded rapidly enough. Without opportunism, tastes would change too slowly, and the demand would cling to products whose costs were constant or on the increase. To meditate on this is to understand one of the conditions of economic progress.

¹² *Documents pour l'histoire des prix* by Jean Fourastié and Claude Fontaine; the period covered is 1910-1955.

¹³ The question of servants shows better than any other that a general increase in wealth cannot place the poorer families in the position previously occupied by the wealthy families. In fact, the rich have always had servants; hence, it is obviously impossible for all to have servants. This question also shows that the position of the richest families cannot but suffer in the course of a general increase in wealth; for this raises the price of men, as compared with the price of objects.

It appears, then, that economic progress rests, in general, on the *opportunism* of the individual. The individual must be an opportunist in production; that is, he must be willing to exchange one role in society for another which is more productive. And he must be an opportunist in consumption; that is, he must direct his desires to objects that can be produced at decreasing cost. The well-being of the individual will then be a function of this double opportunism. And hence, also, the phenomena of irritation, anxiety and disenchantment will appear precisely to the extent that an individual lacks this opportunism.

A man who lacks this double opportunism not only fails to further the general progress; he positively hinders it. By refusing to change his place for more productive employment, he lowers the average productivity. By refusing to buy new products that may decrease in cost, he restricts their market and impairs their chances of actually decreasing in cost. He does not, therefore, only stand apart from the movement of the economy; he attracts the hostility of other men. Hostility to a man who fails to keep up with his time is a vague sentiment, but as we have just seen, may have a rationale behind it. The more importance one attaches to the speed of economic progress, the stronger this sentiment tends to become. A man who lacks the required opportunism finds, then, that he is subject to the pressures, not only of the circumstances, but of public opinion as well, and this may lead him to behave *as if* he were endowed with this opportunism. And his behavior "as if" may in turn result in inner tensions. Psychoanalysts seek the origin of such tensions much too often in infantile experiences when they may quite simply lie in present pressures.¹⁴

11. We have thus arrived at social questions, after taking the indirect route which leads through the domain of economics. In *Emile*, Rousseau contrasts two models of the good life. On one model, a citizen subordinates all his interests to those of the community, and loves only his country. But this, according to Rousseau, is only possible in a small rustic society with very stable morals. It has always struck me as odd that so many students

¹⁴ One might also find in these pressures the origin of the remarkable role which the nightmare has played in contemporary literature.

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of Rousseau, beginning with Robespierre, should have tried to create his community of citizens under social conditions which, as Rousseau had expressly said, were incompatible with it. Because Rousseau looked upon the society of his time as already too large, too complex and too advanced for such a community of citizens, he proposed, in *Emile*, a completely different model: that of a retired life, untouched by social currents. But a productive society could not exist if everyone followed the advice given to Emile. Such a society could not even tolerate it if a minority followed this advice. Besides, when Rousseau made an effort, in the second part of his life, to follow his own advice, he constantly complained that his retreat was not respected; and this was almost two centuries ago.

The individual in a productive society can in no way be detached. He finds himself engaged in numerous social relationships which undergo constant change and exercise constant pressure. All of the traits of a productive society are to be found in the United States, probably because that country was settled by men who had cut all their ties in order to come there, and who, therefore, offered the least resistance to the mobility and the opportunism that we have found to be essential to a productive society. The new situation in which man finds himself has also been examined most carefully in the United States. It was recognized there that the well-being of the individual, in his social relationships, was a matter of "adjustment."

Since the process of increasing wealth demands that the individual change his place, his neighbors and his practice, it is important that he accommodate himself easily and quickly to his new condition. Since he is displaceable in these various ways, he must also, if he is not to suffer from his displacement, be psychologically displaceable. That is to say, he must feel no more than a passing regret for lost contacts, and he must take vivid pleasure in making new ones—but only because these contacts are new, and not because they are of a certain kind; for these contacts, too, are destined to be broken by a new displacement. And since the wages of displacement are a growing variety of goods offered to him, he must adapt his tastes to what is thus put within his reach.

These are not, as is sometimes said, the characteristics of the American way of life, but those of a productive society in general.

Nothing appears to me more ridiculous than the criticisms addressed to the American way of life by leftist intellectuals who, at the same time, celebrate the gains of Soviet production. It is clear that these latter gains, which are incontestable and striking, have implied, and still do, the same process of displacement, the same duty of mobility and the same tendency to opportunism which we have noted. And all this takes place on a much larger scale because of the greater speed of the movement, and because this movement is, in Russia, directed by a strong central government. *

12. The only "leftists" who are in a position to find fault with the characteristics of the American way of life, are those who are steeped in the traditions of the peasant and the artisan. For a very long time now, there has been a "leftist" movement which is not "chrematistic," which is in revolt against all use of power, and which conceives of an ideal society in something like the following way: Men are not subjected to constraint; they are not spurred on by vanity or by the desire for more wealth; each relationship between them rests on common bonds, which assure that they are naturally drawn together. The soil, the tombs of the ancestors, faith, memories, intermarriage; all these combine to create a natural community which, in turn, inspires individual conduct. It follows from the very nature of the social setting that any tasks, required in the interest of the community, will be carried out voluntarily and in common; and that any decisions affecting the whole will be taken together. For a long time it was thought that this had been the state of nature, and that the power of one man over another, and the exploitation of man by man, were the result of artificial institutions; once these were destroyed, society would return to its former arcadian state.

No one nowadays thinks of reestablishing the arcadian state everywhere. Rousseau already pronounced this to be impossible. Nor does anyone think of making it flourish where the conditions for it may all be thought to be present—which is what Rousseau wanted to do on the island of Corsica. Take, for example, certain regions in Africa, which are free from the pressures of an exploding population and where social intercourse is still centered around each village community. No one would dream of suggesting that progress consisted in ridding these regions of every-

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thing that was opposed to an arcadian state; rather, progress is taken to consist in developing these regions on the model of our productive society. Thus the arcadian ideal is quite dead as far as its positive implications go; but its negative implications linger on. We want a productive society, and yet deplore the features it necessarily has. These appear especially black when compared with the arcadian dream which continues to haunt us.

13. Here lies the conflict which we must try to resolve. Contemporary society is built with the end of greater efficiency of production in view, and on the principle of an ever-increasing flow of goods and services. This principle implies, on the one hand, that the individual as a producer must be mobile, ready to change his place for more productive employment elsewhere; and, on the other hand, that those appetites must be aroused that are the easiest to satisfy. In this society, the material and moral well-being of the individual is a function of his opportunism.

It should be noted that in such a society advertising is by no means the parasite it is thought to be. In view of the fact that there are facilities for producing certain things and not others, the guidance of the consumers' tastes to things that are easy to produce at decreasing costs, forms an integral part of the whole mechanism. Advertising of products, though not of brands, would survive even if the economy were to be socialized. It is in this form that advertising can be seen to emerge in Soviet Russia.

It certainly cannot be denied that the individual in such a society finds himself subject to the pull of the general current. And one may, if one likes, call this "alienation." It can, however, be said that the obligation "to keep up with one's time" under which the individual finds himself, does not differ radically from the obligation to remain in one's place under which he would be in a primitive society. It is difficult to see why conformity to change should be harder to bear than conformity to the *status quo*. Of course, to be uprooted time and again, hurts whatever there is of the habitual within us; but it is equally certain that, in a static society, to encounter great obstacles to change, must hurt whatever there is of the restless within us. The "good conscience" one has in a static society, after one has made one's contribution to the maintenance of good morals, has its analogue in a dynamic

society: in the satisfaction we feel after having done our share to gratify the needs of others.

14. Of course, all these needs are not of equal value. Here our task becomes more precise. An individual in a productive society receives from society a certain amount of credit; and the more efficient he is in helping others to obtain what they desire, the greater the amount he receives. As long as he is busy increasing his credit, the value of what others desire is indifferent to him. This indifference gives to the "motive of profit" its amoral character. It would be wrong to think that only a capitalist acted from this motive. The individual in a productive society who changes one job for another that is better paid, without caring about the quality of the desires he serves, also acts from this motive. In fact, this motive is the general law which governs the "placement" of men in any such society. Now the individual in such a society is not only indifferent to the value of what others desire; it is even in his interest to arouse and maintain those desires in others that can be satisfied with the least effort on his part.

It follows from this that, in a productive society, the individual has no incentive to guide the desires of others towards worthier objects, but instead a strong incentive to guide them toward objects that are easier to produce. He must therefore take an interest in the satisfaction (and in the excitation) of the desires of others, but show no interest in their quality. If these desires appear to him badly guided, his attitude in this respect may be described, in flattering terms, as tolerance, but could be described, in more accurate terms, as interested complacency. Nevertheless, since he must live with others, he is affected by the kind of life they come to lead, as a result of such gradual changes in their desires. If he has sold intoxicating beverages, he must put up with the inconvenience of living among intoxicated people.

We thus arrive at the following simple truth: Although an individual has an immediate interest in serving the desires of another, irrespective of their quality, he has, of necessity and in the long run, an interest in the quality of the kind of life his contemporaries lead.

We can imagine the producer being pushed by an "invisible

hand” to the place where he can best serve the preferences shown by the consumer. But we do not feel that there is an “invisible hand” which arranges the products around the consumer, so as to bring them into harmony and to display a style of life which will bring out all of the consumer’s potentialities as a human being. For a generation now, efforts have been made to improve on the workings of the “invisible hand” which were formerly left to themselves—efforts, that is, to bring to perfection the mechanism of production. This mechanism now issues a flow of commodities of ever-increasing abundance and variety. But what an average family selects from this flow is ill assorted, fails to serve its purpose, and looks like a collection of odds and ends. We feel uncomfortable in front of a shelf of books whose principle of selection was the award of a literary prize. The same lack of style characterizes our contemporary way of life.

15. The Latin word *amoenitas* designates the pleasurable features or the charm of a perspective. Neither a wild place nor a functional building can be called “amene,” only a place which is delightfully fit for human habitation. Since this is the proper meaning of the word, it seems to me well chosen to signify the quality which we would do well to bring into the midst of our lives. I am pleased to see that this word figures already in the English legal vocabulary, and that it should have entered into it precisely in connection with the “external costs” of industrialization: “The loss of amenities” means that industrial construction may have taken away some of the pleasant aspects of a place. Conversely, a systematic effort to render a place more agreeable is called, in the United States, “to create the amenities.” The word means then, fortunately, what I have in mind, which is the harnessing of our productivity to amenity.

Advanced nations are nowadays very proud of their productive capacity. They will have better reason to be proud of it when this power will be used to make life more agreeable—that is, to develop amenity.

A good indication of our present state is the excessive importance we attach to vacations. We think of these not only as a pause in the current rhythm of our lives, but also as a change of place, away from where we usually are. It is hard not to con-

clude that the great value we attach to this pause and to this change implies a very unfavorable judgement on the nature of our daily rhythm and on the merits of our place of work or residence. A man whose life was more happily arranged would hardly have such a strong desire to escape.

Too much attention has been devoted to the progress of productivity, and is still devoted to it every day. It is time to devote some attention to the progress of amenity.

16. "My concern is to increase the amenity of life." here we have a very imprecise statement. But lack of precision is not lack of sense. It is rather as if the statement contained too much sense. If I were to say "My intention is to increase my knowledge," no one would reply "I do not know what you have in mind." What someone might say to me is "I do not know what kind of knowledge you want to acquire;" for it may be Greek philosophy, the theory of games, nuclear physics, abstract painting, or atonal music. And after I have made it clear what kind of knowledge I am after, my interlocutor may ask whether this kind deserves, more than any other, the expenditure of effort I propose to bestow on it. Similarly, my statement concerning amenity must be made more precise before it can be discussed. And this is what I will now try to do.

Man is a sensitive, working and social being. As a sensitive being he perceives forms, sounds, odors; and his sensitivity is the source of enjoyment and suffering. The lack of this sensitivity is an imperfection, its development a step towards perfection. External conditions that offend this sensitivity, or oppose its development, are an evil, while external conditions that cultivate or delight it are good. And this is part of amenity.

As a working being, man may be harnessed to his task, riveted to his function; he may feel that he is held to his work by an imperious external force or by a cold or malevolent destiny; he may struggle against this necessity which is imposed on him from without, or feel resentment towards it; he may dream of freeing himself from his enslavement to his task. And all that these feelings make him suffer is an evil. On the other hand, it is good, and one of the greatest goods we can enjoy, to be absorbed in, and delighted by, one's task; to look upon interruptions as

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necessary means for doing an even better job; to regard one's task as the best use one could make of one's life. And this, too, is part of amenity.

Finally, as a social animal, man lives necessarily with others. He may encounter indifference and even malice; he may feel that he annoys others, that he is deprived of esteem or affection. And this is a great evil. But he may also find himself in good company; he may encounter good will made more agreeable by pleasant manners. Good company will not only provide him with immediate pleasures; it will also cultivate him and carry him to the degree of social perfection of which he is capable. Happy, if he finds in his circle some who can arouse in him the feelings of love and admiration. And this is also part of amenity.

Thus, the nature of our physical surroundings, its relationship to our work, and to the nature of our social contacts; these are, it seems, the chapters into which a discussion of amenity would be divided.