The Spiritual Significance of the Economic Value of Man

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THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF MAN

Is spirituality itself a primordial moving force in the advance of civilization? The significance which many thoughtful writers are attaching to the apparent resurgence of spiritual values in America as evidenced by the current statistics of church membership, sales of novels with a religious setting, and receipts from motion picture films depicting a spiritual theme, connotes a growing belief that this is so. Professor Cullitan of the Harvard Business School describes this trend as becoming "the most potent force in the continued development of America and the dynamic preservation of the good part of Americanism without the fossilized preservation of everything that has been fondly labeled 'American.'" Professor Toynbee has assigned a greater responsibility to such a spiritual uprising—the task of saving a disintegrating civilization.

This reflection of the mood of our times, with all its portent for goodness can be a most dangerous movement. It can be a reaction, instead of a going toward. It can be a running away, instead of the
facing of a difficult task. It can be an admission of helplessness and hopelessness. It can be all these things if spiritual values are to be relied upon as primary causal factors in the betterment of human relations.

To put the issue squarely, there is a tacit assumption being made that the worthiness or dignity of man rests solely on the qualities of the spirit, and that these qualities are primordial. It will be the contention of this essay that, in speaking of society as a whole, this assumption is false; that these spiritual values arise from the placing of a high economic value on man by men, and that this value in turn is a direct function of the productiveness of labor. If this premise is sound, it follows that there can be nothing permanent about the current rise in spiritual values in America (if, indeed, this is a fact) unless these values are fed continuously by the sweat and savings of men.

Discussions of this character involve a certain amount of vagueness. Spiritual values do not lend themselves easily to empirical analysis, nor can they be defined with precision. Generally speaking, they have been accepted as those expressions of humanitarianism which are voluntarily extended by man to his fellowmen. Specifically, they can be defined as those qualities possessing the attributes of charity, compassion, and tolerance.

The contention that these spiritual and humanitarian impulses are by-products of production, will be defended by two methods—the first, by use of a theoretical illustration built on certain reasonable assumptions, and the second, by presenting an historical sketch of the sweep of Western Civilization. The approaches are mutually exclusive of each other, and yet, each adds credence and strength to the final judgment. The economist will claim, rightfully, that the reasoning is not as finely drawn as it ought to be. The historian, with equal good reason, will question the selectivity of the examples used. Such, however, are the limitations of an essay of this scope.
LET US ASSUME the existence of a very large group of free men with a normal distribution of capacities for production. Each man farms an equal quantity of equally fertile land which is better than marginal. Capital tools are too scarce to have any significance so that production is dependent, almost entirely, upon hand labor. Somewhere below the middle point in our group, say the fortieth percentile, there will be people barely able to eke out an existence. Those with lesser capacities will have a negative net value, that is, they will be consuming more than they are producing. Their dependence on those individuals with superior intelligence and energy will become self-evident because these bottom producers will have learned through experience that they are unable to supply their own sustenance, and that they must rely upon others to fill their needs.

The result of this situation will be that those least fortunate in the possession of native talents will bargain their freedom for physical needs. In a relatively short time there will be a subjugation of many by the few, and there will tend to develop a greater maldistribution of wealth than maldistribution of productive capacities. Abuse of this monopolistic condition is to be expected, and slavery as an institution can easily develop. It may even be that some of those individuals who have a net value to the community will be forced into this slave group, but large numbers of them will find themselves free, only technically, as they drift into a system wherein they owe allegiance and tithes to a dominant individual or individuals.

There will be little charity, compassion, or tolerance displayed within or toward the marginal or submarginal members of this group. These individuals are not valuable to each other, and our ruling class, which has a plethora of labor at its disposal (few of whom are capable of anything but the most menial tasks), will think of and treat this servile group as expendable.

There will be a tendency, as savings accumulate in the hands of a few, to transform these goods into active capital as opportunities
for increased production appear. Individuals who control this capital can become extremely wealthy, in relative terms, if they can find the labor to use the capital tools intelligently. As the tools become more technical the need for trained and intelligent men becomes greater. An economic demand arises for education of a larger proportion of the group. Technical knowledge is passed on to the laborers who, through the building and operating of tools and machines, acquire a more practical ability for producing immediate income than those of the so-called leisure class whose talents have been directed increasingly toward administration and cultural pursuits. Division of labor is carried much further than heretofore with two marked effects. Many men become more dependent upon each other, and each of these men has increased his economic value through his capacity for producing a greater volume of material goods.

Production of material goods soon creates a need for, and a dependence upon, individuals in the service trades. Shopkeepers and storekeepers arise to dispose of surplus goods. Wholesalers are sorely needed as the wheel of trade brings our group and others into more frequent contact. Financial institutions develop to aid in the flow of savings through indirect lending. The services of government and, particularly, its institutions of justice (which grow as a natural concomitant of complication with its inevitable misunderstandings) are in greater demand. Education of a larger proportion of the people, as has been mentioned before, becomes a necessary service to specialization. The point to be emphasized is that none of these services are possible without surpluses of goods above subsistence, and the quantity of services permitted and demanded can only grow as production of material goods grows. The result, however, is a progressive division of labor and a greater interdependence of people.

Somewhere along this route a resistance to arbitrary demands and rulings by masters will develop. Men who are valuable to others demand something more than wages and support. They
seek respect and the right to an increasing amount of freedom. Certain individuals of high economic value to others will command this respect and attain greater freedom. In time whole classes of people will reach this objective.

Should the savings and capital resources of our hypothetical group increase to tremendous proportions so that surpluses over subsistence are fabulous, division of labor can progress to the extent that every man is an expert in his own right. So minute can job classifications become that there evolves a greater equality of productive powers than of intelligence. Fields of knowledge may be split and resplit until even a University, typically departmentalized, becomes cubby-holed. Under these conditions, all members of our group would so demonstrate their value to each other that the doctrine of equal rights for every man, once a privilege protected by law, becomes a tradition accepted by all without question.

There can be little doubt that at this stage of economic development the doctrine of the brotherhood of man, which a few members of our group have been practicing and many others have been preaching for so long, is the only practical manner of living. In fact, a social law, long suspected, now emerges as axiomatic, namely: a community's capacity for charity, compassion, and tolerance (spiritual values) to its members is directly proportional to the degree of equality of economic value of the individuals within that community. Further, a high degree of equality of economic value can only be attained through a substantial per capita production of material goods in which a high degree of dependence of one individual upon another is present.

It may be possible that other theories based on different assumptions, could be woven to prove this argument unsound. It is doubtful, however, if other approaches could be termed realistic, particularly, in view of the experiences of Western Civilization. If other civilizations have been founded on different values than
those of material goods, it ought to be emphasized that there has
not been in such cases an opportunity for a substantial increase of
material goods. It is probably true that wherever technical pro-
gress has made possible the distribution of large amounts of ma-
terial goods into other cultures, the philosophy described above
has gained ascendancy. The exception, sometimes pointed out, of
the destruction of material goods by certain primitive peoples in
conspicuous consumption, is neither an exception nor uniquely
indigenous to primitive peoples. Certainly, however, as far as
Western Civilization is concerned, the theoretical approach which
has been employed should serve as a rather faithful portrayal of
the causes of its progressions and regressions, toward and from the
dignity of men within large groups.

IN THE EARLY days of Western Civilization, when the influ-
ence of the cultural nomads was coming to an end as the dominant
form of economy, perhaps four to six thousand B. C., these wan-
dering peoples began to settle down in free villages along the Tig-
riss and Euphrates rivers. The freedom of these men to toil in
their fields, however, was slowly restricted as stronger individuals
tested their abilities to abuse and enslave the weaker members of
their group. Whether we are speaking of Babylonia or Nippur
prior to 2500 B. C., Cnossus in Crete of an even earlier date, the
Hellenic villages, including Athens, Chalcis, Corinth, or Rome
in the first millenium B. C., or the settled villages of Europe from
the eighth to eleventh centuries, the first phase of their develop-
ment was generally freedom, and the second, increasing restric-
tion of that freedom. As the superiority of one individual or vil-
lage over another became evident, domination and slavery were
practiced on an increasing scale. Not only were the weaker individ-
uals easily susceptible to enslavement but whole villages, in-
cluding their free classes, were commonly subjugated.

Most free men have an aversion to constant drudgery, and,
therefore in the days of little capital, it was possible to increase
total production of a community by forcing men and women to labor from dawn to dusk. One of the early phenomena of this striving for increased output was the frequent occurrence of an individual, born to slavery, earning his freedom through production. When surpluses arose, necessitating a market place and then storekeepers, it was most common for this recognition to be granted. Of course, it happened even more often in the case of newly enslaved people who had been free elsewhere.

The destruction, however, of material goods had a contrary effect on the charity, compassion, and tolerance practiced by members of a community. This is particularly evident in the six hundred year period covering the Messenian, Peloponnesian, and Punic Wars. The pressing problem of overpopulation was felt by all the city states of Greece from the eighth to the fourth century B.C. Under such conditions slavery would be expected to grow and it did. Different Greek states, however, used different methods to solve the problem of shortages of goods. Sparta, in the first and second Messenian Wars, attacked her neighbors with varying successes. The result was the development of slavery of the most vicious type. Corinth and Chalcis found the going easier by exploiting and colonizing Sicily, Thrace, and Southern Italy, and a less abusive type of slavery was evident in their social structure. Athens, however, for a long while turned to division of labor and intensive cultivation of her soil, and the result was a growth in political power to new classes of people unheard of in the history of the world to that time.

When, in the fourth century B.C. Athens turned to exploitation through war, thus throwing a great cost and a lower standard of living upon the populace, racialism, not noted by historians to have existed before this time in this cosmopolitan city, came into vogue. The institution of slavery sunk to lower levels and even Aristotle rationalized that it was natural for some men to be slaves. He would not have reached the same conclusion a hundred years earlier for he would have been witness to another trend—
the increasing ability of men in bondage to earn their freedom.

For more than a hundred years following the death of Alexander, in 323 B.C., the stage in the Hellenistic area was being set for an increase in the dignity of Western man. Production through technology, and trade with the East were large. In spite of almost continual warfare the material welfare of the populace was rising. Treatment of slaves tended to be gentler and manumissions were common. A greater humanitarianism as an ideal was commonly taught in the schools. And yet the promise of this age sunk to the lowest levels as the Roman tyranny spread through the war of attrition against Hannibal.

In Greece the standard of living fell so far as to cause smaller families and a widely accepted practice of infanticide. Inequality of incomes became more marked and the dignity of man, which had reached such a high relative peak in Athens in the fifth century, was precipitately declining.

In Rome the nadir of human relations was reached. So great was the drain of resources by war that there could be no constructive economic function for much of the slave population, captured or natural, and over the next two or three centuries the “thumbs up, thumbs down” gladiatorial exhibitions of slaves and criminals found widespread acceptance in the Roman moral code. The extremely cruel civil war and the crucifixions of thousands of followers of the Gladiators Spartacus in the first century B.C. are further examples of how worthless human life became when men were directed over a long period of time to the wholesale destruction of material goods.

It is not surprising that in such a desecration of morals a religion that teaches the dignity of the common man and which offers surcease from woe in the Kingdom of Heaven would hold great appeal to the downtrodden individual. Christianity swept through the masses with tremendous force and became powerful enough to be adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire in 337 A.D.
In spite of this new light, and in some cases enlightenment, the economic collapse of Western Civilization carried everything with it including the soul, but not the structure, of the newly founded Church. Roman schools disappeared—an economic service too costly to bear when material production and distribution fall so completely. Roman republicanism gave way to a monarchy which, although adopting Christianity, soon pressed this new institution, with the support of Christians, into more war.

When Theodoric, the Goth, became King of Rome in 493, he replaced no one. The throne had been vacant for seventeen years. The layers of unproductive fat in the body politic, that the slaves and half-free plebians had struggled to feed and service, had been cut out. Financial obligations could be ignored. The cost of the military had disappeared. The triumph of barbarism, not of the Goths but of Western Civilization, had run its course.

The Dark Ages, so-called, from the seventh to twelfth centuries is a story of slowly increasing trade, the founding of free villages followed by the reintroduction of serfs and slaves, the subjugation of many of these villages, and finally, the rise of the lord and his manor. It can be said with much truth: "This is Western capitalism repeating itself."

Now, however, the speed of change could be greater. The monastic orders had contributed greatly to the preservation of knowledge and its advancement. Transportation and communication improved, and technology spread. The merchants became the efficient distributors of the goods of the lord and the Church, and these men early gained their freedom. In fact their freedom became the freedom of whole towns. Lübeck was such an example in 1188. At an earlier date, 1074, Cologne, through the hands of irate merchants, expelled its Archbishop, demanded and obtained its freedom. King John of England, 1199-1216, badly in need of money, was a wholesale purveyor of charters granting freedom to towns.

From the thirteenth to the nineteenth century it is the mer-
chant who everywhere is championing freedom and self-government. Expanding markets created useful employment, and a larger part of the labor force became valuable in its own right. The Church, however, in some respects, was a counteracting force. Because of its opposition to interest, trading was more difficult than it should have been. The Inquisition ran counter to the moral teachings of the Church. Towns under Church control were slow in gaining their freedom. It is not surprising, therefore, to find businessmen as a class supporting Martin Luther and his Protestant movement. Wars were many, some in the name of Christianity, but fortunately production and markets grew faster than war could destroy them so that freedom and its concomitant, democracy, made great strides.

Toward the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century a speeding up of industrialism occurred. With it came a period of exploitation of labor that has damned and dogged big business to this day and completely blinded many intelligent writers of history to its most real and, it is to be hoped, enduring contribution—a higher possible value for all men everywhere.

Economically speaking, this exploitation was natural though doomed to a short life. Tremendous improvements in the use of capital were being made, but ownership of this new capital remained in the hands of a few. This temporarily upset the equalization of economic values of men that had been progressing for seven hundred years or more. The net effect, however, was to increase the productiveness of labor through technology and specialization, and, as a result, the economic value of labor soared. This was manifested in a natural trend toward higher and more equal distribution of incomes in the century to come. It was this spurt of commerce that gave men sufficient charity, compassion, and tolerance of others to cause the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833, and in the United States in 1863. It is an unfortunate and inaccurate interpretation of the facts for Toyn-
bee to write: "[If] the drive of Industrialism had not been largely neutralized by the drive of Democracy, the Western World would not have rid itself of slavery so easily." Democracy, itself, was nurtured and won by production, and the temporary position of capital as a tool of the few does not alter the significant truth that freedom and dignity for the individual come through savings and output.

The Industrial Revolution has made it possible to take great strides toward the development of charity, compassion, and tolerance for our fellowmen, but so far most of the advance has been within groups of people with common background and heritage. Both the theoretical approach and the empirical evidence submitted in this essay omitted reference to intergroup improvement in human relations. The economic reasons for this failure of spiritual values to make significant gains between heterogeneous groups are two. First, the international division of labor has been discouraged because of the relative ease of creating promising specialization at home, and because of the difficulty which man has experienced in maintaining full employment, particularly when this problem is made more severe through the importation of competitive goods causing greater unemployment. The value added to men by manufacture has been so great as to permit a net gain, in many instances, even when artificially protected high costs of production are present. The temptation, and sometimes the wisdom, of putting a man to work in uneconomical production fosters the persistence of protectionism. This slow progress, or perhaps regression, in the international division of labor has led to a less apparent dependence of one group upon another, than has been apparent within a group. The popular feeling in the United States, for instance, that we should not export cotton textile machinery to China nor import more than a limited amount of sugar from Cuba is evidence of this lack of feeling of dependence.
Second, where a feeling of dependence on materials, but not men, is real, such as is cultivated by the need of industrial nations for pig bristles, natural rubber, oil, or uranium which are abundantly present in undeveloped countries, the strong technological nations have been ruthless in their treatment of less materially productive peoples. Here again is the picture of inequality of the economic values of men, this time groups of men, resulting in little charity, compassion, or tolerance on the part of the more valuable group.

Since 1914 the lack of apparent dependence of one group upon another and this widening spread in inequality between groups has dealt the dignity of man in some parts of the world a crushing blow. Two world wars have destroyed capital faster than men have been killed, thus leaving masses of the world's population without sufficient tools to raise large groups above the margin. Without a doubt, the rise of authoritarian governments in Europe and even in America between the Wars resulted partially from the destruction of material goods throughout much of Europe from 1914 to 1918. The rise and spread of Russian Marxism from 1918 to date is the most spectacular manifestation of this economic disease.

With the extreme destruction of material goods during the second World War, masses of people have been rendered economically valueless. Slavery has returned, if not as an institution, as a sadistic reversion of economically frustrated peoples who have succumbed naturally and voluntarily to the philosophy that man obtains his rights from the State. How different in those countries enjoying a relatively high standard of living where the State obtains its rights from the people.

It may be true, as some have prognosticated, that Western Civilization is now experiencing its third hundred years' war since the birth of Christ, and, if so, that we have more than a half century of destruction before us. It is this possibility that highlights
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the faulty and dangerous reliance which is so generally placed upon the teaching of spiritual values as the mainspring for a more charitable, a more compassionate, and a more tolerant world.

The argument does not deny a feeling of deep humility for the power of the spirit in influencing man to accomplish the incredible. History, however, has shown the incredible to have been two-edged—magnificent in accomplishment, and brutal in destruction. When production of material goods has tended upward over long periods of time, larger percentages of people who have shared in this rising standard of living have attained dignity in the eyes of their fellowmen. In such periods the capacity of man for charity, compassion, and tolerance has grown, and as an enlightened self-interest, has served to increase production.

When, on the other hand, output has suffered a sustained loss, or when the fruits of production have been shunted continuously to uneconomic uses, the moral fabric of the people weakens and the bestial qualities of self-preservation assert themselves.

Economic disintegration of the Hellenistic world from the fourth century B.C. to, perhaps, as late as the sixth century A.D., was a more influential force than the accumulated moral teachings through the Golden Age of Greece plus the tremendous impact of five hundred years of Christianity. The enormous destruction of capital over a major part of Europe since 1914 has been a compelling influence in the spread of a philosophy that enslaves men's bodies and souls and relegates the individual to the status of supplicant to the State. This is "materialism," but it is a materialism without the "materials."

Historical evidence appears rather conclusive, as, indeed, theory would have led us to believe, that although the magnificent accomplishment of the dignity of man everywhere will most certainly be a triumph of spiritual values, this dignity will come only as a result of the productiveness of mankind.