

A Humanist Approach to Economics

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Economics is a word used to describe that complex of culture traits and relationships through which men secure their livelihood. Technically, economic culture traits are built up by discovery and invention.

The man who first harnessed fire or made dynamite made a contribution to the sum total of human culture. He was not in a position, however, to determine how the new forces should be used. Both fire and dynamite may be employed constructively or destructively. They may be used to build or to tear down. It is the community that, through its customary procedures, its educational institutions and its administrative apparatus, must determine the manner in which new agencies are employed.

How is one to know whether a technical product such as a piece of tempered steel or an electric motor is being used for advantage or harm? For wealth or illth, in Ruskin's phraseology. There is of course no infallible test, but there are criteria or guides to judgment such as:

1. *Does the use to which the artifact is put tend toward the maximum of life unfoldment and fulfilment for the largest possible number of persons?*

Specifically this would mean that in deciding whether a skein of yarn should be put through a machine and be made into a sweater, or should pass through human hands and be made into a sweater, the matter of primary consideration would not be efficiency—the minimum of labor hours—but the personality fulfilments of maker and of consumer. Instead of transferring all production to factories as a means of lowering labor costs and increasing the total volume of profits, hand craft industry would turn out all of those products in the creation of which personality develops.

Following out this principle, wire nails and railroad cars would be made in factories. Many articles of clothing, furnishings, furniture, household equipment, dwellings, decorations of various kinds and most foods would be the product of handcraft.

Or, in deciding how many people should live on a given square mile of land surface, the test would be, not how much their presence will yield in rents to landlords and in profits to merchants, but what population density will result in the maximum of radiant health and joyous endeavor for the individuals who inhabit the area.

2. *The economic apparatus should provide the community with an adequate flow of goods and services.*

It is not the business of an engineer in the municipal water department to guarantee dividends to makers of water pipe. He is there to see that the city dwellers have the water they need.

What holds for water holds equally for food, clothing and other necessities. The economist should see to it that plans are made and carried out under which people will be well fed and well provided with the necessities and decencies.

3. *The nearer any economic process can come to self-service the less the danger of parasitic deterioration and the greater the probability of joy, growth and a sense of fulfilment.*

Corn from the market cannot have the flavor of corn from the

home garden; first, because it is wilted, and second, because it is not seasoned with sweat and surrounded with the aura of plans and hopes that inspire the home gardener.

The more goods are processed, the more mineral salts and vitamins they lose and the less the feeling of fulfillment which accompanies a direct relation between production and use. This is true not only of food products, but of all consumer goods and services. A hope chest filled with the most expensive goods from a department store never has the significance of one that contains the handmade products of the owner and her friends.

4. *The closer men live to the rhythms of nature the greater their stability, poise and sense of oneness with life.*

Children should go to bed at dusk and get up at dawn. They should romp over grassy slopes and poke their fingers and toes among the pebbles of flowing brooks. They should watch butterflies and birds. They should thrill with the out-going joy of spring and prepare in the austere autumn days for the rigors of winters. Following the rhythms of nature provides more than a formal education; it stimulates unfoldment and growth, and attaches the fortunate individual irrevocably to Mother Earth.

Every day, every week and every year every adult should renew his contacts with nature. He may walk in the woods, sit on the grass, breath deeply of pure air, bask in the sunshine, dig in the earth, enjoy the storms or watch the stars. But not for long should he allow his earth contacts to be broken.

The gardener should defend with passionate determination his right to grow flowers, vegetables and fruit. No aspect of life is more important to his wellbeing.

Those who have been shut away from nature in factories, office buildings and the slums of Hester Street and Park Avenue should organize a crusade with banners: *Back to Earth; Sunshine and Starshine for All; We Will Dig; Long Live Mother Nature.*

Commodity production and high pressure selling have made millions of talented humans into spectators who stand outside all of the creative processes of nature and society, and feel their own creative impulses shrivel and die. It is time they break the chains with which business for profit had loaded them, and once more breathe the glad free air of creative endeavor.

These are four of the basis considerations that should determine the character of an economic order. If men want to live long and happily they do not go into a tightly-shut garage and start the engine. This is suicide. Is it not equally suicidal to permit considerations of efficiency of profits, of ostentatious consumption and of body comfort to stand in the way of a full, free, abundant life?

Modern man has at his disposal a technical apparatus that makes it unnecessary for him to struggle all day for a bare subsistence. Economically he is freed from the rigors of bread labor. How long will it be before he learns to handle this invaluable production instrument with the same loving care and the same sense of creative power that an artist imparts to his brush or a poet to his pen?

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