Off-beat Economics

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ARGUING for a return to the simple life, a writer in *Manas,* Los Angeles, makes the common mistake of blaming the natural laws of economics for man's own follies, for his injustices, his ignorance and weaknesses. Greed and competition, says the writer, are two of the harmful effects of our economic system. If we were less greedy, we would, he says, be less competitive. "All those who desire to reform the economic system can take an effective part living simply and urging and encouraging others to do likewise."

Now there is nothing wrong in living simply, indeed it is a virtue. But it is a personal decision and has nothing to do with economic laws.

Since under "capitalism" man exploits man, the best way to end or reform capitalism is to opt out of it personally, argues the writer. But what is the capitalist system? As a system of economics it involves free and private enterprise and free and open competition. Is this bad? Is it bad that one can shop at Marks and Spencer's, Woolworth's, Littlewood's or British Home Stores, according to choice rather than at one state store or "people's co-operative"?

If we are to eliminate competition in the class room, for instance, are we to total all the marks earned and divide them equally among the pupils? And greed is not a result of capitalism, it is a state of mind that can show itself under any system.

Living simply, the writer argues, cuts down on the individual's share of exploitation as it cuts down on unnecessary labour and resources, enabling these to be used to "better" advantage. The author explains what he means in this passage:

> "Since poor people imitate the rich, we see girls on small wages buying furs, expensive shoes and cosmetics, and depriving themselves of proper food and warm clothing in order to do so. In such a case the ostentatious luxury of the rich clearly is a factor in causing hardships and sickness, and resulting in unnecessary labour on the part of the poor, to repair those losses. The fashions in luxuries often change arbitrarily and suddenly, and such changes create unemployment. Those who work at luxury trades, are, in time of economic depression, in the most insecure position of all, because then the spending for luxuries is the first thing to stop. Therefore the fewer people there are engaged in luxury trades, the more secure the population will be."

Apart from the fact that girls on small wages are unlikely to be able to afford expensive shoes and furs and that in buying a fur coat a girl is actually obtaining warm clothing, this paragraph reveals the author's weakness in the field of economics and logic even if it does him credit for his concern for the poor.

It would not be so bad if the author had not previously said that ". . . much intellectual clutter and underbush has to be removed in order to see clearly" and "since our thinking runs predominantly to economics, we (should) consider first the economic aspects."

That there is something fundamentally wrong with the way we live today, few would deny, but philosophical remedies cannot be divorced from economic remedies, nor must we forget that economic ignorance is more to blame for our present condition than avarice and greed.

Whether we like it or not, man lives in an economic environment — he has since he first struck fire, invented the wheel and shaped his first tools, and until he recognises as the starting point the economic and moral difference between what he himself fashions into useful economic articles and the gifts of nature, no real and satisfying economic and social progress is possible.

* Richard B. Gregg, *Manas*, September 11 1974

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