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On Good Works and Good Work

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As Americans, we like to think of ourselves as the people whose hard work makes the world work. We are the people, in Carl Sandburg's terms, who make the steel, stack the wheat and butcher the hogs. We produce the things that really count - the real things like automobiles, computers, grain and steel.

Our image is not the reality. Most of America's employed people never touch an ingot, engine, transistor, hog or stack of wheat. The majority of us are teachers, bankers, therapists, salespeople, lawyers, consultants, motel keepers, doctors, clerks, counsellors, auto mechanics and bureaucrats. Instead of producing hard goods, nearly two thirds of us now derive our income by producing those soft things called services. Daniel Bell predicts that in 23 years, by the year 2,000, 90% of us will be service producers and only 10% of the employed Americans will be directly involved in producing hard goods.

This shift to a work force that produces services rather than goods is the culmination of a historic ideal. It is the fulfillment of an ancient dream - the liberation from hard work in order to do good works. We are finally free to devote ourselves to the good works of caring, curing and developing - work that serves rather than sweats.

A paper presented at the Conference on New Strategies for Education, Work and Retirement, Center for Policy Process, Washington D.C., April 21, 1977.

Freed of the physical labor that diminished humanistic potential, we have created a serving society.

There is, however, a hidden dilemma in the growth of our services. In order to provide universal work by serving each other, we will need more clients who need help, or clients who need more help. Full employment in a serving society depends upon more people who are understood as lacking, disabled, deficient - somehow short of the ideal. To develop a serving economy we depend upon more crooked teeth, family disarray, collapsing automobiles, psychic malaise, educational failure, litigious conflict and underdeveloped human potential. A society of fully employed servers needs more people in need. Our economic growth depends upon our capacity to identify more deficiency.

The growing deficiency market is now measured as a major national benefit. Our Gross National Product is increasingly a counting of the "productivity" gained from services purporting to deal with our "growing" deficiencies.

Consider your own value in a serving economy should you die of cancer next year. If you have a long, fully treated, "quality care" death, its value could appear within next year's Gross National Product as $250,000. There are very few people who can be that productive in one year, or several years.

Consider all of your other valuable deficiencies. There are those deficiencies that you perceive. There are those deficiencies you have been taught by your servers to perceive. And there are those deficiencies that you don't know you have but that your professional servers can identify.

In a serving economy, the sum of all these "deficiencies" becomes your human value. In a economy that counts the good works called service, you become the nation's most valuable commodity if you are sufficiently deficient.

A service economy needs people in need. This need for need helps to explain the three basic categories that have come to define American lives. We are educated, we work, we retire. Each year, the number of people who are educated and retired expands. They are the majority of the "deficient" people who are said to depend on the service of those who work. The reality may be that the working people depend upon an increased supply of the young and old in order to work. This may explain why we extend the number of years of education required to secure a job and the necessity for earlier mandatory retirement.

Increasingly, a serving society depends upon young and old people who can be defined as problems rather than productive participants. The young and the old have become the raw material of a serving economy.

President Carter recently outlined the economic crisis that could result from our current patterns of energy consumption. The energy crisis would be a minor tribulation if we suddenly viewed the young and the old as competent, able, productive citizens rather than deficient, consuming clients in need of the good works of a serving economy. Ours is an economy fueled more by age specific "deficiency" than by oil. We depend less on the Arabs than commercialized deficiency, paid care, professionalized service and the allied managers, consultants, planners and experts that a serving economy demands.

An economy dependent on the good works of service creates a nation of clients - the recipients of good works. Fewer and fewer people can be called citizens - people who do good work. On the other hand, a democratic society requires citizens rather than clients; people who are competent rather than deficient.

A democracy is the sum of the good work of citizens with the capacity to solve problems.

A served society is the sum of the deficiency that "enables" people to be clients.

If we are unable to free ourselves from the ideology of service, we will die of our dependence on deficiency. A nation of clients cannot conceive of a democratic possibility, much less act in behalf of the common good. A nation of clients will accept the central premise of serving systems, i.e., "I will be better because my servers know better." This premise, embedded in any culture, is the basic foundation for totalitarian rule.

If there is to be a democratic American future, it will require us to reject the "humanistic" vision of a nation of clients "consuming" the good works of a serving economy.

A nation of citizens doing good work must also recognize the limits of its capacity. We live in a world of limited resources, capital and relationships. Our capacity to solve problems is limited. We will always suffer. We will die. These limits are the boundaries of our possibilities.

The grand illusion of the serving society is to deny these limits. While the service system feeds on the purported deficiencies of its clients, its propaganda insists that serving systems will ultimately

break through the limits and deliver us the freedom to be whole.

The service systems' basic proposition is that its good works will finally make anything possible. In this claim, it is the new God of a nation of clients. It offers a Faustian deal. In exchange for our incapacity, we are offered utopia.

There is, however, another possibility. It is the possibility of citizens enabled to solve problems within the limits of their capacity. It is the possibility of creating communities of mutual support and obligation. It is the possibility of creating tools that make rather than control. It is the possibility of justice and equity.

A democratic society <u>needs</u> to reject the utopian promise of incapacitated clienthood. Our democratic possibility depends upon citizens who believe in their capacities and understand their limits. If we are to persevere, we will know that citizens are people with the incredible possibilities of failing to be God.

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