

THE END OF AFFLUENCE? (Originally published October 1974)

We have lived, and are living, in a time of great affluence. No matter how much or how often we complain of taxes, inflation and the increasing cost of everything, the fact remains that Americans not only live quite comfortably but continue to spend outrageously and waste money on all sorts of unnecessary conveniences. How much longer we can continue to do so is a matter of great debate among philosophers, economists and historians. Some feel that the end is already in sight.

Dr. Arnold Toynbee, the famous author of the twelve-volume "A Study of History," is still alive and writing at the age of 85. In an article that appeared last spring in the *London Observer*, he paints a gloomy picture for the future of Western Civilization.

Toynbee observes that ever since the Industrial Revolution began two centuries ago, Western economy has required constant "growth" to keep it going. Even though by now the bargaining power of labor has overbalanced that of capital, both contending factions agree that more "growth" is essential to satisfy the constant and irresistible demands for continual increases in wages without loss of profits. But in Toynbee's opinion, "growth" in the so called "developed" regions—Europe, North America, the Soviet Union and Japan—has virtually ceased and soon will be reversed. Continual economic growth is going to be replaced by continual economic recession.

Terms of trade have now turned against the "developed" countries in favor of the "developing" countries. As a result, the West will soon find itself in a state of siege in which the material conditions of life will become permanently austere and progressively more severe. This turn of events will be met with strong resistance at first and, as each "developed" nation becomes frustrated by its inability to alter the forces, it will soon become involved in a bitter struggle to control its own diminished resources.

The end result, in all "developed" countries, Toynbee says, will be the imposition of severely regimented life; and this can only be imposed by a ruthless, authoritarian form of Government. All trades, all professions and all classes will be regulated, controlled and paid according to some compulsory, arbitrarily imposed value scale. Nearly all private property will become nationalized; and some economic pursuits like stockbroking and real estate developing will disappear.

It is not a comforting picture that Toynbee paints. The change will not occur overnight, but the beginnings of it are already evident in Western Europe, and particularly in Britain and Italy. It seems almost inevitable that it will appear in America before long.

The older generation may not live to see all this come about, but our children and grandchildren will certainly have to contend with it.

In Russia and China, we already have two strong, authoritarian, regimented societies serving as examples and, if the situation predicted by Toynbee comes about, they are likely to become the two dominant world powers of the future. At least they have a running head start over the disorganized, fumbling societies of Western Europe and America. Maybe we had better tighten our belts, get rid of the frills, learn self-discipline and try to prolong our free life in modified fashion as long as we can. In the future we may have no choice.

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