

Our Changing Economy

Problem of Reality Can Be Most Unreal

By Philip Stoddard Brown

THE problem of children is to face reality; of parents, to escape reality. At least this has been my view of life for some time. But it occurs to me that my notion of reality is all wrong. Maybe others too are mistaken, including Thomas Mendip who, in "The Lady's Not For Burning," asks "what greater superstition is there than the mumbo-jumbo of believing in reality?"

Certainly the reverse can be argued credibly: that the work-a-day life of most adults is unreal and what most of us long for is an escape to reality.

Year by year, more and more people become paper-pushers. They aren't in the fun of creativity. They have no part in the conception, planning and tussle that goes on prior to introducing a new play or the opening of a new restaurant.



Brown

Adults in Wonderland

These people aren't a part of reality in their daily work. They live among archives of sales slips, receipts, tax returns, letters of acknowledgement and referral. They note and they file; they review and they report. They deal in facts and figures.

Most "facts" of social life are but records of the dead past, or opinions sanctified by citation. The harder the fact, the more like sainthood it is, something dubiously established long after death.

What is real is the process of creativity, the yet-unborn fact. Reality is a prenatal living, where ideas joyously conceived kick around and gestate prior to birth, before they are christened "facts."

After christening, lawyers and court clerks probate the will of the creators. Bookkeepers record transactions and accountants tally them. The statisticians juggle the figures and make tables and pictures of them. Last of all, the economist comes on the scene, long after birth. He is the theologian of business life, given to philosophizing about what went on during the prenatal period and projecting the after-after life.

Jobs Aren't Created to Give Employment

In 10 years, there will be 15 million more persons in the labor force of this country. Few of those emerging from our teeming schools and colleges will become self-employed. Will there be jobs for them and for other millions who will be displaced from existing jobs by push-button machines? What kind of jobs?

Population growth by itself doesn't give rise to new jobs; it doesn't create any purchasing power, or effective demand for more goods and services. Supply and demand can be in equilibrium at any level of unemployment, as we have only to observe by looking abroad, or backward to our own prewar economy.

Jobs are created to implement the conceptions of imaginative people: those who conceived the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution, the National Bureau of Standards, Walter Reed Hospital, the National Institutes of Health, our schools and universities, Riggs Bank, Melpar, The Washington Post, the National Symphony and Arena Stage.

Is it not wrong to think in terms of creating jobs to give employment, or of achieving a certain rate of growth in GNP? What does it avail if the value of output is increased by more red tape, by more public-relations activities, more tax litigation and more frequent styling of autos and refrigerators?

Another Veil Over Reality?

We now have a Commission on National Goals, instructed to report in January, 1961. Will we be given one more statement about the number of jobs needed to provide full employment and the desired rate of growth in GNP? Will there be the usual talk about educational and health needs, better housing and the urgency for urban rehabilitation, more foreign aid and increased national security?

How much better it would be to draw upon our most creative businessmen, scientists and artists and propose specific projects—ones that would capture the imaginations of people.

If instead of uneconomic bail-out programs to deal with unemployment and emergency school needs, missile lags and crises abroad, we could focus our energies on projects of grand design, how much more alive and productive we would all become.

Big undertakings require a lead-time of planning and development. You don't simply turn the taps of monetary and fiscal policy. You don't simply vote a little more money as you would for roads and old-type public works, or a little more lending authority as you would to finance more conventional houses.

But somehow we don't recognize our enormous capabilities. We don't realize that our investment in feeding and clothing millions of children over the past 20 years is about to yield an annual net increment of 1½ million educated men and women to our labor force. We are really rich, but we set ourselves petty goals because we think that's all we can afford.

Well, it's fun to dream of how things might be, just as it's pleasant to escape to reality by spending an evening at the theater . . . But back again to unreality. There's so much that's dead and remains to be buried. For one thing, all those facts about 1959 await interment in a casket of income-tax forms that lie in front of me.