

Our Changing Economy

Little in 'Good Life' Tied to Rising GNP

By Philip Stoddard Brown

Washington Economist and Business Writer

This year the women of America will produce 4½ million babies and "gainfully employed" men and women, some \$500 billion worth of goods and services.

These are magnitudes far beyond my power to comprehend. And it doesn't help to be told that one year's crop of babies laid head to toe would extend halfway across the continent or that the year's output of cars and trucks placed bumper to bumper would exceed the distance around the earth.



Brown

More amazing, \$500 billion of goods and services isn't all we could produce. But sometimes I wonder if it's worth producing more, or even this much. What will it profit us to produce more cat food, more ugly lamp shades, more hideous ashtrays, and more trite landscapes and conventional religious art?

To produce even more paper tissues, plastic bags, cardboard boxes, tin cans, coat hangers and magazines might make for a helluva potlatch, but these products aren't likely to provide even this satisfaction. They will either pile up in the basement, or add to the gigantic volume of trash to be disposed of each day.

Out of the tremendous volume of goods produced, both for utility and adornment, few are well designed. Out of all the services produced, how few are memorable. At times, I wonder if the amount of misinformation, useless facts and cliché art produced in our schools, newsrooms, studios and factories doesn't exceed the output of what's true and useful, original, and beautiful. Are we richer or poorer at each day's end

Progress Would Surprise Greats of Old

If the great men of the past could view the "progress" of this century, I expect that what would surprise them is how little of the enormous increase in per-capita income is spent for things they coveted and could not buy. Most people don't buy any books of literary merit. Few people have ever bought any painting, jewelry or ceramic object, except stereotypes. Few people have ever been to the legitimate theatre. Many of the books we do buy, the plays we attend and music we hear were written long ago. Much of the art we collect and reproduce are paintings and artifacts of the past.

Some people may argue that we have been betrayed by advertisers, by merchants and manufacturers and by government. They adduce examples of ugly objects they were compelled to buy for lack of any choice. They say they are induced to spend money on things they don't need. But who's to blame for that? No, there's no conspiracy, no diabolical plot to fill our houses with shoddy materials, gift-shop art and stupid books and magazines. Even the houses themselves don't have to look the way they do.

If people wanted beautiful utensils, furniture, cutlery, tableware, jewelry, paintings—and ashtrays—they would be forthcoming. If there were a big demand for good plays, poetry and mural decoration, I have no doubt these too would be available without having to turn so often to the old masters.

In the days of Athens' glory, many Athenians wanted beautiful objects in their houses; they wanted handsome public buildings and good theater. Poor as they were, they got what they most wanted—and it was usually in good, and often superlative, taste. Athenians had a passion for beautiful things, the well-turned quip and, above all, new ideas.

Neither Athenians nor the men and women of Renaissance Italy hunted Culture in packs, as we do today. Art wasn't confined to museums. In fact, the words Art and Culture, in the sense we use them, hadn't been invented. Beauty, like love, was a passionate and personal experience.

Predictions of Another Golden Age Challenged

We are told that the 1960's will be another Golden Age, but all I can foresee is an Age of More GNP: more cars and express highways, more houses and blaring TV sets, more children and schools.

Maybe it would be better if the composition of our gross national product (GNP) were a little different—relatively more public services and relatively less of what can be bought privately—but surely the goal of economic activity is somewhat more than the right mix of private cars and public jungle gyms, or private swimming pools and public health clinics.

What should be our objectives? I have a strong hunch that it's no good looking to economists or politicians or to any National Commission on Economic Objectives. If there is to be any redirection of our economic life, I expect it will just occur gradually, when enough people scorn the GNP or quantitative approach to progress, despise what is stereotype and cliché and become impatient with all this bookkeeping, passing around of memos and watching TV spectacles in the evening. Then maybe there will develop greater appreciation for what's genuine and aesthetically pleasing, for what's true and new.

In reading about those Golden Ages of the past one senses a great national pride and purposefulness, great individuality and contempt for conformity, great gusto and free thinking. England in Elizabethan days had a foreign power to contend with. This diverted a good deal of its energies and resources, but people—gentlemen and artisans alike—had a zest for good theater and for adventure.

But what the "good life" is—and what our national goals should be—I don't know. The Greeks thought that what was good must be beautiful, and not in any sense of imitation. Beauty and zeal for new ideas are certainly ingredients.

Could it be that the decline of the cuisine—the advent of the canned goods and store pastries—and the rise in sumptuary taxes on wine and liquor are the roots of our spiritual apathy?