

THE PAST AS PROLOGUE

Historian Will Durant had some amazingly precient information to offer in 1968. I quote at length:

"The experience of the past leaves little doubt that every economic system must sooner or later rely upon some form of the profit motive to stir individuals and groups to productivity. Substitutes like slavery, police supervision, or ideological enthusiasm prove too unproductive, too expensive, or too transient. Normally and generally men are judged by their ability to produce-except in war, when they are ranked according to their ability to destroy.

"Since practical ability differs from person to person, the majority of such abilities, in nearly all societies, is gathered in a minority of men. The concentration of wealth is a natural result of this concentration of ability, and regularly recurs in history. The rate of concentration varies (other factors being equal) with the economic freedom permitted by morals and the laws. Despotism may for a time retard the concentration; democracy, allowing the most liberty, accelerates it. The relative equality of Americans before 1776 has been overwhelmed by a thousand forms of physical, mental, and economic differentiation, so that the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest is now greater than at any time since Imperial plutocratic Rome. In progressive societies the concentration may reach a point where the strength of number in the many poor rivals the strength of ability in the few rich; then the unstable equilibrium generates a critical situation, which history has diversely met by legislation redistributing wealth or by revolution distributing poverty.

"In the Athens of 594 B.C., according to Plutarch, "the disparity of fortune between the rich and the poor had reached its height, so that the city seemed to be in a dangerous condition, and no other means for freeing it from disturbances ... seemed possible but despotic power." ¹³⁵ The poor, finding their status worsened with each year the government in the hands of their masters, and the corrupt courts deciding every issue against them-began to talk of violent revolt.

"The rich, angry at the challenge to their property, prepared to defend themselves by force. Good sense prevailed; moderate elements secured the election of Solon, a businessman of aristocratic lineage, to the supreme archonship. He devaluated the currency, thereby easing the burden of all debtors (though he himself was a creditor); he reduced all personal debts, and ended imprisonment for debt; he canceled arrears for

¹Plutarch, *Life Of Solon*.

taxes and mortgage interest; he established a graduated income tax that made the rich pay at a rate twelve times that required of the poor; he reorganized the courts on a more popular basis; and he arranged that the sons of those who had died in war for Athens should be brought up and educated at the government's expense.

"The rich protested that his measures were outright confiscation; the radicals complained that he had not redivided the land; but within a generation almost all agreed that his reforms had saved Athens from revolution.² ..."

Durant quotes several other instances where this happened, among them the French Revolution, and suprisingly, the Reformation and the loosening of the autocracy of the Catholic Church.

"The government of the United States, in 1933-52 and 1960-65, followed Solon's peaceful methods, and accomplished a moderate and pacifying redistribution; perhaps someone had studied history. The upper classes in America cursed, complied, and resumed the concentration of wealth.

"We conclude that the concentration of wealth is natural and inevitable, and is periodically alleviated by violent or peaceable partial redistribution. In this view all economic history is the slow heartbeat of the social organism, a vast systole and diastole of concentrating wealth and compulsive recirculation."

Durant, Will; The Lessons of History, Chapter VIII.

Since Dr. Durant wrote these words, the wealth gap in the United States has multiplied itself by orders of magnitude. Not since the robber barons of the 1890's has the wealth ratio been so divergent.

The current administration seems hell-bent on widening the gap even more. I have to wonder at what point the citizenry will say 'enough'. I've had the feeling for the last twenty years or so that all the necessary ingredients to foment our equivalent of the French Revolution were present. I kept trying to tell myself that I was wrong. I can no longer tell myself that I was in error.

Hopefully 'someone who had studied history' and sees how to avoid the coming major upheaval will ride in on a governmental white horse to save us from the "violent partial redistribution" of wealth and consequent disruption and loss of millions of lives. We can only hope.

2 *The Life of Greece, 112-18.*