



The Acquisitive Society

R.H. Tawney

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This 1926 survey, written by a distinguished social and economic historian, examines the role of religion in the rise of capitalism. Arguing that material acquisitiveness is morally wrong and a corrupting social influence, the author draws upon his profound knowledge of labor and politics to show how concentrated wealth distorts economic policies. Colorful but credible, this study offers a timeless vision of alternative means toward a just economic, social, and intellectual order.

The Acquisitive Society Details

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From Reader Review The Acquisitive Society for online ebook

Jose Manic says

Tawney is not the only 1920's economic writer who was not only dead right but from whom we do not seem to have learnt from. Beautifully written in the style of the day (I have an old yellow-paged fraying edition which adds something) I would recommend this to anyone who thinks that consumerism is a modern phenomenon. Not sure I would recommend it on Kindle though. It would seem like a museum piece whereas it is as relevant today as ever.

Edward says

Kind of dry and intellectual, but I think I was still able to grasp Tawney's point. Essentially, he's saying that money and property are means to an end, rather than ends in themselves. Society ought be organized on the basis of function, rather than on privilege.

Barry says

A classic. Presents the case for basing our economy on a different distribution of property rights based on fulfilment of social obligations. Good food for thought.

Marcelo Pérez Dalannays says

Es mucho más fácil oponerse al capitalismo con barricadas que elaborando un discurso contundente, pero sólo este último método puede ser tomado en serio y sentar bases perdurables. Tawney habla con propiedad - fue profesor de Historia Económica, no un simple agitador o activista- y plantea una crítica verdaderamente persuasiva sobre las deficiencias de un sistema económico dominado por individuos que no aportan a la producción pero exigen derechos (accionistas), o defienden la propiedad privada pasiva (el autor tiene cuidado de distinguir esta de la propiedad privada bien merecida, sutileza que no advierten los partidarios de izquierda dura), constituyéndose en el principal escollo no solo para la justicia social sino para la propia eficiencia productiva.

Se diría que una tesis tan bien articulada puede ser peligrosamente efectiva en las manos adecuadas (de algún caudillo socialista), pero tampoco puede sustraerse a aquello contra lo que advierte («...Era su pretensión - por mucho que haya sido degradada por intrigas y ambiciones políticas-...con una confianza noble, aunque quizá demasiado optimista») y es que el s. XX fue generoso en pruebas que desmienten o moderan la postura a veces voluntarista de Tawney respecto a los beneficios de la administración estatal, el control obrero de la producción y un sistema no capitalista, todo lo cual ha anclado su libro a 1921.

A pesar de todo sería injusto y miope considerarlo obsoleto, porque los efectos colaterales del sistema financiero imperante hoy son evidencia de que aun no podemos evadir estas preguntas punzantes.

Riley Cox says

The title alone simply foretold the society of instant-gratification accelerated by capitalism. Most quotable, nuanced critique of capitalism out there and it's without all the butchering communist getting in the way of seriously needed reflection on the currently unstoppable/irreversible pace of capitalism.

!Tæmbu?u says

KOBOBOOKS

Tucker says

R. H. Tawney taught at the London School of Economics. He was the son of the Sanskrit scholar Charles Henry Tawney, who translated *The Ocean of Story* into English.

He finds fault with incomes that are excessive or that result from little effort, and he proposes that workers should instead be paid according to the moral and social value of their work. In *The Acquisitive Society* (1920), he advocates a “functional society” that would compensate labor based on upon some “moral” assessment of its value, instead of merely in terms of how much money could conceivably be made off of it. Exactly how this society is to be achieved is rather unclear.

“No one has any business to expect to be paid ‘what he is worth,’ for what he is worth is a matter between his own soul and God. What he has a right to demand, and what it concerns his fellow-men to see that he gets, is enough to enable him to perform his work. When industry is organized on a basis of function, that, and no more than that, is what he will be paid.”

He declares that “poverty is a symptom and a consequence of social disorder” and that “hundred-family salaries” - that is, one-person salaries that could feed a hundred families - “are ungentlemanly.” The tone of the quasi-Marxist rhetoric generally rings clear as a bell, somehow emerging from tangled sentences like: “What form of management should replace the administration of industry by the agents of shareholders? What is most likely to hold it to its main purpose, and to be least at the mercy of predatory interests and functionless supernumeraries, and of the alternations of sullen dissatisfaction and spasmodic revolt which at present distract it?”

These claims are not supported by much data or history, so anyone who wants to read this while learning about the context of turn-of-the-century England would need to acquire a companion history book.

There are a handful of interesting passages about the philosophical concept of rights. He argues that the formation of the concept of absolute individual rights was a rebellion against absolute state power, and that individual rights aren't really absolute. Rights, rather, “are derived from the end or purpose of the society in which they exist.”

His underwhelmingly successful prediction about England:

“The national output of wealth per head of population is estimated to have been approximately \$200 in 1914. Unless mankind chooses to continue the sacrifice of prosperity to the ambitions and terrors of nationalism, it is possible that by the year 2000 it may be doubled.”

James says

I read this in college.

Gary Armstrong says

The central argument of *The Acquisitive Society* (1921) is that Britain is infested with a false philosophy that prizes material accumulation over civilised values. This is not merely a modern occurrence, but one that can be traced back to the 17th century, with the gradual displacement of a body of ethics from the economic realm that affirmed our essential humanity by limiting exploitation and preserving communal ties.

Prior to the ascent of capitalism, economical activity was merely one compartment of existence, with its operation regulated, albeit imperfectly, by an overriding moral consensus; the retreat of the Church and the Christian Casuistry, allowed the market to be magnified to generate a monomaniacal society in which all aspects of life are subjugated by economic concerns. This materialism results in an atomised society in which social duties are subsumed by individual rights; where human beings are reduced from the ends of ethical consideration to mere tools of accumulation; where private property is sanctified to ensure that it is preserved to benefit a narrow section of the population, and society is scarred by class resentment and division.

Tawney's solution is for the creation of a Functional Society, which is socialistic in all but name. This new society will be animated by the principle of social purpose, with all actions directed to the fulfilment of obligations to the community, rather than self aggrandisement. Although Tawney is primarily concerned to identify the broad philosophical contours of this society, he does offer practical prescriptions. First, the commanding heights of the economy should be brought into public ownership, with transport, arms production and energy deemed too important to be left to the market. Tawney, as distinct from other notable socialists, cautions against elevating nationalisation to an end in itself; rather it is a means to deliver beneficial social outcomes to be judged according to this criterion. Second, private ownership of productive property is acceptable providing that it meets social objectives and its owners are motivated by the principle of social service. Third, that within public and private organisations, powers are devolved to the workers, primarily through trade unions, to play an active role in running organisations, with parliamentary oversight ensuring that producer power does not encroach on the interests of the consumer.

The Acquisitive Society is remarkably prescient in its principles, whilst being anachronistic in its prescriptions. In the current climate of economic turbulence, free market fundamentalism is under a sustained assault for the very reasons outlined in Tawney's work. There is an emerging consensus that the market has over reached itself, not merely because of its failure to generate sustainable growth, but because it has encouraged forms of human behaviour, like greed and selfishness, that are morally and socially unacceptable. Within this discourse of social and economic decay, Tawney's appeal for a more humane society focussed on collective social concerns does resonant. In terms of his prescriptions, the period since the publication of *The Acquisitive Society* provides little evidence that public ownership or workers co-operatives have been particularly successful in delivering social objectives, let alone sustaining themselves as efficient economic organisations. Tawney's faith in these socialistic ideas reflects the tenor of the times in

which he wrote, when capitalism was perceived to be imperilled and doctrines like guild socialism were flourishing. Although governments are once more employing nationalisation, it is being adopted as an emergency measure, rather than as a long term tool of socialist renewal.

At times of capitalist crisis, it is Marx, with his doctrine of the inevitability of collapse, that marauds round the pages of our newspapers as the Prophet, only to return to the dustbin of history as capitalism re-emerges renewed and reformed. When we emerge from the tumult, rather than substituting one fundamentalism for another, it is to figures like Tawney that we should look to for inspiration in reconstituting our society. In *The Acquisitive Society*, and the superior *Equality*, Tawney, does not provide a systematic theory that is devoid of errors and misconceptions, but he does outline a broad philosophical disposition that is striking in its humanity, and salutary in its promotion of social purpose.

Leon M says

"[Society:] must regard economic interests as one element in life, not as whole of life. [...] It must so organize its industry that the instrumental character of economic activity is emphasized by its subordination to the social purpose for which it is carried on".

"*The Acquisitive Society*" by R.H. Tawney is a great volume on that mainly proposes one thing: To subordinate economic activity to social purpose. In order to achieve this aim he wants society to (a) abolish all proprietary rights that are not accompanied by the performance of service, (b) make sure that producers stand in a direct relation to the community for whom production is carried on and (c) give the responsibility for the maintenance of the service to professional organizations of those who perform it.

Tawney discusses the negative connotations of the word "nationalization", stating his opinion that it really is nothing more than a buzz word, as it does not define by what rules and regulations such a "nationalization" should take place. He illustrates why ownership which is not based on the fulfillment of social obligations should be considered bad from his point of view.

The opinion stated in this book really is not very complicated, but my problem with the book is that it overcomplicates the whole concept of basing the economy on the fulfillment of social obligations. The sentences are unnecessarily long, the concepts and illustrations more complicated than needed. Quite probably the essence of this book could be condensed into 20 or so pages of easy English. That would be a great thing as the idea is really worth all the publicity.

Another problem I have with Tawney is the idea that he states in the last chapter, namely to introduce his concept to society by the means of a moral standard judged by the church. He argues that the church needs the power to sanction its members. I don't see why Tawney needs the church to be a part of his equation.

But still: All in all this is a great book, definitely worth the effort the reader will have to put into reading it and understanding the concepts presented!
