



How Good Is the Good Society?

What is a “good society”? And what is our role in creating it?

BY TERRENCE FERNSLER

The Good Society

By John Kenneth Galbraith. 152 pages. Hardcover. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, N.Y.

Most agree that our country has taken a dramatic right turn. John Kenneth Galbraith personifies that shift. Once viewed as mainstream, he is now considered ultra-liberal fringe—and he hasn't changed his message at all.

Galbraith tells us that our great social struggle is no longer capital vs. labor. Today it is the privileged vs. the underprivileged. The privileged control our government and public dialogue, and they are fiercely protecting their interests. They focus on labels and fabricate “either-or” scenarios, such as “conservative vs. liberal.”

Galbraith, of course, has always been considered a liberal. A liberal is defined in the dictionary as one who is generous or favors reform or progress. In the past, nonprofit organizations were, by and large, liberal, too. In fact, nonprofit organizations used to be called charities, and many government regulations (which are difficult and time-consuming to change) still refer to

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them as charities or charitable organizations. However, nonprofit organizations no longer organize just to help society along what Galbraith refers to as the great historical trend. The change in nomenclature from charity to nonprofit reflects a shift in society. Nevertheless, many of us still believe in the good society. But what comprises a good society?

To Galbraith, a good society will have a progressive income tax and a socially responsible minimum wage. It will provide education and family support. There will be freedom from social disorder, a safety net for those who cannot make it, the opportunity to achieve in accordance with ability and ambition, a ban on financial gain that harms others, protection of future well-being from inflation, and a cooperative and compassionate foreign dimension.

A steady historical trend is in control of society, Galbraith asserts. This trend, which leads to such social benefits as universal education and the abolition of slavery, tends to empower the underprivileged. The reaction of the

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privileged is to hold tighter to the influence they have left while giving less to—and showing less compassion for—the underprivileged.

Galbraith believes nationalism (which has caused this century's greatest tragedies), deregulation, opposition to immigration, racism (disguised or overt), and consumeristic fervor are knee-jerk reactions that abandon thinking. Galbraith's good society is based on common sense. We all live together on this planet, and humans are social animals, so we'd better get along and be responsible.

"Crime and social convulsion in our cities are the products of poverty and a perverse class structure . . . that ignores or disparages the poor," Galbraith believes. His solution is employment and opportunity for all through year-by-year economic growth. (Of course many will argue that there cannot be continual growth with limited resources and that eventually everyone's share will dwindle. Others will contend that even if such a course is possible, it does not address many other contributors to poverty and crime. And some will dispute Galbraith's assertion that eliminating poverty will wipe out the problems of crime and a perverse class structure. But, then, this book makes a great starting point for all sorts of debate.)

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Galbraith eagerly accepts the challenge of balancing democracy and capitalism to work for the benefit of society. The needs of the many outweigh the desires of the few. For the more ideological, the challenge is blending democracy and capitalism so they both survive.

The Good Society is an overview of Galbraith's beliefs. They have not changed over many years. In this book he consolidates them and even gives us a direction rather than remain an aloof academic. Again, although he aims us toward a good society, he is, more than anything, a democrat: He lets society determine how to achieve the good society.

This is such a thought-provoking book it is recommended for all nonprofit

personnel. In fact, this publication shows Galbraith's worth as a professor; no one can read it without thinking hard—about where we are, where we want to go, and what role we play, as individuals and organizations, in achieving a good society.

Nor can we read this volume without pondering how the new struggle (the privileged vs. the underprivileged) affects nonprofits. If the privileged prevail, they will continue to take government aid from the underprivileged. The burden will fall on nonprofit organizations. Galbraith shows us that economically this is not necessary, and socially it is undesirable.

This book will also make readers think about economic priorities and their impact on nonprofits. Too often nonprofit CEOs and development directors assess their fundraising efforts based on short-term results. In our push for quick revenue, we let ourselves be constrained by economics. By focusing on a single aspect of society—the economy—we shortchange ourselves.

Nonprofits are historically the center of compassion in our society. Compassion is the necessary ingredient for a humane approach to our economy. Galbraith sets a shining example of one who maintains a vision of a better world, of a good society. Likewise, our strength as nonprofits is in our vision, and holding on to it. ■



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