

Wanted— An Index to Prosperity

Can we really tell from car-loadings, stock sales, and bank clearances how glad Americans are to be alive? In disputing the value of these indices, Jay Franklin proposes a new index of human misery.

By Jay Franklin

A student of American affairs was asked recently what he would look for as signs that the Depression was passing. He answered promptly that the signs were not easily accessible but that if he wished to know whether the people were desperate and suffering there were certain very definite matters which would demonstrate it: the number of evictions, the number of illegitimate births, the number of articles pawned or redeemed, the growth or decline of unnatural vice, the number of suicides. Information on these points, if made currently accessible, in compact statistical form, would show whether the people were socially happy and economically satisfied.

This bold proposal was promptly challenged by his questioner. "How can you tell anything by these things?" he was asked. "Every one of them would have to be critically analyzed before it would be significant. For example, a wave of suicides might simply mean that a spineless group of people had met with trivial misfortunes, while the subsequent absence of suicides might merely mean that the suicidally inclined element of the population had weeded itself out, while those who were left were suffering worse than ever. Decline in the number of articles pawned might simply mean that people had pawned everything they possessed. Decline in evictions might simply mean that the landlords had realized that they could find no other tenants. In this way, an increase in evictions might be the sign either of greater depression or returning prosperity."

"Exactly," replied the expert. "That simply points the need for such statistics as I have mentioned. They would supply the basis for discussion, criticism and analysis. I never saw a Stock Market report that did not provide violent disagreement among experts as to the cause of market fluctuations. I never saw a business prospectus of a corporation report that did not demand interpretation. My suggestion is simply that if we had daily statistics on the subjects which I have mentioned we could begin to analyze the condition of the people themselves and educate ourselves in the basic factors which determine and illustrate public well-being."

On these terms, I propose that some branch of the Government, preferably the humanized Department of Labor, make it its business to collect and report daily, through the press, information which could indicate whether the human being in America is suffering, desperate, sanguine, or resigned. The task of analyzing and interpreting these figures, when published, would be a national education in itself.

First, we really ought to know the number of human

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beings in this country who want work, who are able to work and who are unable to find it. A nation which experiences no difficulty in listing the number of its hogs, or in checking up on its steel production should be able to assemble the figures without material difficulty. Even the best estimates are no good for this purpose. We should know the facts daily. The initial shock would be serious, but we should quickly become habituated to the facts. Three years ago, we were shocked by the idea that we had six million unemployed; today we would be delighted to have such a low figure.

Then, we should have daily totals of the number of people who are dependent upon relief funds, both private and public. That total seems to be at least as relevant to our national problems as is the daily publication of the foreign rates of exchange. The *Monthly Relief Bulletin* issued by the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor contains some admirable facts and figures on this point as does the same bureau's monthly *News Bulletin on Social Statistics*, but they are too detailed and too delayed for effective public consumption.

We should also have daily figures on pawn-shop pledges and redemptions. In France, where the government owns the *Monts de Pieté*, this is practicable. It is one of the best measures, if divorced from monetary values, of the economic difficulties of the great bulk of people. It is infinitely more reliable than data on evictions and foreclosures, for legal restrictions and local political conditions can easily influence the latter figures. The essence of the social statistics which we desire are that they should reflect the actions of individuals in relation to their environment, rather than against other individuals. Thus the growth, or decrease, of crimes, even of crimes against property, might reflect simply greater or less police activity, rather than greater or less need.



Also of merit would be the proposal to publish daily totals of suicides in the United States. Figures on suicides would have to be discussed very critically, yet it is certain that there is a close, if not an exact, relationship between suicide and economic welfare. The fact that the rate of suicide has shown a steady increase, until now more than 20,000 Americans kill themselves each year, is a significant evidence of the inadequacy of our way of living.

Why should not we publish every day in the newspapers the total number of children born in the United States during the preceding twenty-four hours, with a division between legitimate and illegitimate births? No one factor could provide a more effective commentary upon the mood of the nation, though naturally subject to regional, racial and seasonal factors. Thus we could expect the first effect of a serious economic uneasiness to be the reduction of births. This has in fact happened, the rate having dropped from 18.0 per 1,000 in 1931 to 17.3 in 1932 — a figure which means that there are 85,000 fewer babies in the United States than there would have been had the old rate been maintained. This represents over twice as many lives as we lost in the World War. One does not need to be a biological inflationist to feel disquietude at this decimation of our future population. There would, however, be correctives to these fig-



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ures. For example, a sudden jump in the birth rate might easily reflect, not returning prosperity, but the impoverishment of the mass of people to a degree which forbade the purchase of contraceptives or which reflected a mood of reckless irresponsibility akin to the war-baby impulse.

The same thing, of course, is true of the marriage rate. The birth and marriage rates both declined in 1932. Yet a sudden bulge in the marriage rate might simply demonstrate that, in the words of England's war-time limerick, "There's one thing Lord Rhonda can't ration." The impulse to marry is strongest among people who are very poor, or who are very rich; only the middle-classes approach matrimony with economic circumspection. Nevertheless, daily figures for the number of marriages in the United States would be an indication of the trend of human hope for the future.

The divorce rate would be chiefly significant as an indication of prosperity. While it is subject to expansion through the easing of restrictive legislation, in general divorce may be regarded as a luxury. It costs money, and generally quite a lot of money, to obtain a divorce. The divorce rate has dropped since the Depression began. Weekly, or even monthly, divorce totals should be sufficient as a measure of social security.

There are undoubtedly many other items—the number of children in foster-homes and institutions, the number of visits made by people to free clinics, the number of calls paid by visiting nurses and physicians, the number of children in urban day-nurseries (reflecting maternal employment), the number of meals and beds furnished to transients, the rise and fall of juvenile delinquency, the cases of wife-desertion, and the like—all of which would cast light on the extent to which the human being was suffering. These facts are all available, in partial and periodical form at least, in the Department of Labor. They would, however, not be fully responsive to statistical treatment—too many qualitative considerations enter in. The number of deaths each day, for the same reason, though obviously easy and desirable to publish, would not be precisely germane to the subject, unless it were possible to obtain prompt and dependable figures on the number of deaths in which malnutrition—i.e. starvation—was a direct, or a contributing cause.

To begin the daily, or even the weekly publication, of the appropriate figures on the main headings outlined in the earlier paragraphs would undoubtedly suggest many subsidiary types of information which would also merit regular publication. I do not assume to have done more than indicate in the most general way, the type of material which would serve as a corrective to the distressing national habit of assuming that all is well if the car loadings are up, or if U. S. Steel has broken into new high levels for the year. I submit that prompt current knowledge of the number of human babies who are being born in the country is a more important index of national prosperity than are the imports of raw silk or the number of building permits which have been issued over a given period. In fact, it is not saying too much to assert that the number of suicides is infinitely more important to the sane solution of our national problems than is a rise in the price of wheat.

Moreover, now is the time when it is entirely practicable to assemble and collate such information promptly and regularly at an infinitesimal expense. In every city, town and village of the country there are people who are unemployed and who are in receipt of relief funds. These unemployed include men who are trained to every profession and trade; their moral degeneration as the recipients of charity has become an important consideration in the administration of relief. It would be extremely simple

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and advisable for the relief administrations to assign to a certain proportion of the unemployed, especially those of the white-collar classes, the duty of collecting this information daily and assembling it at state capitals and at Washington through the medium, either of the leased wires of the news services, or through government wires. The unemployed newspapermen of the country alone could organize the details of handling this data with a minimum of expense. Much of it, if not all, would be available through local newspapers. The daily collection, assembly and publication of this data would thus help to solve the moral problem involved in the acceptance of relief by those who have been taught that charity is disruptive of self-respect, and it would serve an urgent public purpose.

For it is a fact that only slowly, if ever, will this country return to the highly individualistic conditions which prevailed before and which produced the Depression. Whether the measures adopted by the Roosevelt Administration restore prosperity, or whether they prove to be merely expedient palliatives designed to prepare the way for more fundamental solutions, it is certain that this country must habituate itself to, and adopt a much higher degree of social coördination. For the politics of human misery have already demonstrated that in any major conflict between human necessities and established economic practice, it is the economic practice which yields. This yielding immediately occasions a wide variety of social readjustment, both voluntary and enforced, but has definitely established the principle of "*salus populi, suprema lex*" as the guiding force behind our policy.

Therefore the phenomena of social readjustment, rather than those of economic production, become the measure of successful policy and the test of political expediency. From this point of view, it is immaterial whether the ultimate fruits of Roosevelt's important initiative in American government, take the form of Fascism, Technocracy, Socialism, Communism or Capitalism. Indeed it is doubtful that even the President could say what is the final objective of a policy designed to raise prices and to redistribute purchasing power in the first instance. The important thing is to give to the Government and to the electorate—for we still follow the forms of democracy—the means of evaluating the real effect upon the people of the measures which have already been adopted and those which are yet to come.

For the politics of human misery is going to be a continuing force in the determination of measures and the transformation of our institutions. We have seen that force, vast, almost inarticulate, overwhelm and paralyze the Administration of a President who was elected by an unprecedented popular majority, in less than two years of the time when he was elected. That force, despite President Roosevelt's far greater majority and infinitely greater individual and political elasticity, is equally capable, in the hands of demagogues or radicals, of overwhelming the present Administration. From the national, if not the artistic, point of view, it may be conceded to be immaterial whether a Republican or a Democrat or a Radical be the instrument which restores the balance of American life. The essential thing is that that balance shall be restored in the minimum of time and with the minimum of pain. So long as the basic public opinion, the force which makes and breaks politicians and millionaires, is ignorant of the true factors which determine national health, so long as popular psychology—so far as it comprehends the matter at all—is uninformed of the true indices of human prosperity, just so long will the demagogue and the one-idea type of reformer be able to menace the stability of the State. The only corrective is the one which has been indicated in this article: the regular, prompt and un senti-

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mental publication of the figures which will show how the individual American is behaving under the stress of an unpardonable economic paradox.

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