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Review of “Life, Liberty and Property,” By Alfred Jones

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BOOK REVIEWS

LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY. By Alfred Winslow Jones. New York: J. P. Lippincott Company, 1941. Pp. 397. \$3.50.

It is hardly orthodox to begin the review of one book by commenting on another, but in this case Robert S. Lynd's "Knowledge For What?" has a direct bearing upon the book in question, "Life, Liberty and Property." Both Lynd and Alfred Winslow Jones are sociologists and both have made their own terms with the traditions of social science literature. Mr. Lynd boldly challenged the basic precepts upon which the older sociologists have written their tracts and literature. He set forth the principle that it is the function of those trained in social problems to do more than find the facts; it is, according to him, their obligation to resolve "the austere findings of the monograph into a bold program for action." Mr. Jones does not do quite that, but he is considerably bolder than the school of scholars of whom Mr. Lynd complains.

Jones' book presents the results of a survey made in Akron, Ohio, in 1938, extending over eight months, in which 1,705 persons were interviewed. Each interview presented a situation the answer to which revealed the interviewees' reaction to corporate property.

Selected representatives from different occupational income groups were asked to express their opinion upon such subjects as sit-down strikes, farm mortgage foreclosures, the use of tear gas against strikers, and collective action to forestall rent evictions.

It was the author's thesis that by the answers to such questions light could be shed upon the attitude of Americans today toward the historic rights of property.

The findings are not startling for they reveal no unexpected trend or condition. The reasonably astute observer of our contemporary problems would probably have guessed at most of the responses. Thus, it is not surprising to discover that the farmers in Mr. Jones' survey were more reverent toward corporate property than the CIO rubber workers in Akron, and less reverent than the business and professional leaders. It is not surprising to learn that the majority of the interviewees were more respectful of personal property than of corporate property, and it is not surprising to learn that very few individuals even in the city of Akron thought in Marxist terms or that they possessed no very acute class consciousness. Most of these conclusions could have been drawn with reasonable accuracy by the thoughtful newspaper reader or certainly by those who have read the hundreds of current books of the last decade.

What is important in Mr. Jones' book is that it provides the factual data for many of the assumptions we have accepted without adequate documentation. In that respect, his work is useful and will furnish valuable footnotes for future works that will paint on a larger canvas the picture of America in transition.

There was a day when the popular commentators on conditions in America, and even the more scholarly social writers, evaded accurate definitions.

This was particularly true in dealing with class conflict. Throughout the nineteenth century, our social commentators too often attempted to solve current problems by turning their backs on them. This method had been so traditional with respect to friction between the different income groups that cries of rage met Mr. Roosevelt's early policies whenever they seemed to suggest that there were economic classes in the United States. It is one of the virtues of Mr. Jones' work that he meets the class issue head on, and that, while he records a lack of active class consciousness among his interviewees, he nevertheless discloses that they do think as classes on the vital question of corporate property. Such realism, of course, helps us inch out of the sands of mythology closer to the light of fact. Mr. Jones goes somewhat further and gives us the faint outlines of a solution when he asserts that unless those with political power are able or willing to bring about satisfactory economic conditions "the way will be open to blind and destructive social strivings whose final consequences are unpredictable."

Of course, such fairly obvious and moderate prescriptions are a far cry from the Lynd demand for bold social programs, but they do represent a disposition on the part of Jones to assume some responsibility for his own discoveries.

If we had found any reason for disagreeing or doubting the accuracy of the author's findings, we might criticize the selection of Akron as the proper place in which to have conducted this study. Akron, the home of most of the larger rubber corporations, is exceptional as a one-industry town, and for the last five years industrial warfare has been particularly bitter there. One could hardly expect to discover in such an environment a perfectly average reaction among the people.

But it is not merely in the economic field that absorbing inferences may be drawn from "Life, Liberty and Property." There is ample material to stimulate the psychologist and the fiction writer. In attacking or defining corporate property, Mr. Jones' human guinea pigs were discouragingly governed by their own private interests. Almost without exception they appraised the rights of corporations on the basis of how corporate institutions affected their own livelihood and hope of advancement. One cannot read the results of Mr. Jones' study without being reminded of the cynicism of Vernon Parrington who came to see the American scene as one precariously constructed on the shifting soil of acquisition and the passion for gain.

The problem posed by Mr. Jones is indisputably economic, political, and legal; but it is also strongly moral, and while Mr. Jones probably had no idea that his effort would remind any reviewer of what a mere fiction writer may have said, the fact nevertheless remains that this writer was led by "Life, Liberty and Property" to recall the closing chapter in Thomas Wolfe's "You Cannot Go Home Again," wherein the evils and failures of society throughout the world were reduced to the failure of individuals through the ages to subordinate greed and selfishness to the more ethical patterns of human behavior.

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