

THE ACQUISITIVE SOCIETY

by R.H Tawney

Review by
Mohamed Irwan Mohamed Taib

This is probably Tawney's most provocative and influential book. Published in 1920, *The Acquisitive Society* held that the acquisitiveness of a capitalist society was a morally wrong motivating principle. He mentioned in his book that acquisitiveness had and will always corrupt both the rich and the poor. He argued that in capitalist societies work is deprived of its inherent value and thus becomes drudgery, for it is looked at solely as a means to exploit the workers for monetary gains of certain individuals within the system or organisation.

Tawney articulated that function should be a principle governing the way societies work. He also argued that the right to property should be conditional on the obligation to public service. "All rights", as he wrote, "are conditional and derivative, because all power should be conditional and derivative". In his view, this was because they were derived from the end or purpose of a society. If a society is to be healthy, the people must regard themselves not as the owners of the rights, but as trustees for the discharge of functions and the instruments for social purposes.

A society in which industry and institutions are organised around the concept of human happiness and social good is described by Tawney as functional. According to him, this is in contrast to the 'acquisitive societies' where production and accumulation of wealth have become ends in themselves.

Let us observe in the context of Singapore, especially where community or social organisations are concerned.

Do these institutions play their part in providing human happiness and social good whilst providing community service and playing the advocacy role for the particular community they are serving? These institutions are entrusted to “function” and provide not only financial resources to the needy but also provide answers and solutions to the community issues at hand. Such institutions cannot be functional when they focus their efforts solely on raising funds that goes beyond the productive output for the benefit of the community. Are our community organisations producing programmes based on “function” or “acquisitiveness” as tabled by Tawney?

In a capitalist society, acquisitiveness, which is the pursuit of personal gain rather than good, manifests itself in the religion it embraces. Within the functional societies, Tawney advocates that the institutions and organisations function as educational agencies supporting the production of debates on what the social good might be. This is in line with what Delbert R. Terrill mentioned on the 'concentration of purpose' among citizens - and how 'from those purposes spring rights'.

Function is very much closely related to providing service in this understanding of social purpose. Service, in this sense, is participation in furthering purpose. In this arises a great deal of Tawney's originality. He ingeniously married service and purpose to the concept of position of property. According to him, by organising around function, the industry and commerce could be governed by the activities of trade boards (participants within the industry who were responsible to the community for the conduct of their industry). An additional feature of his vision was that every trade would be treated as a profession. These traits came together as follows:

The organisation of society using Tawney's basis of functions instead of rights, implies three things.

- that proprietary rights shall be maintained when they are accompanied by the performance of service and abolished when they are not;

- that the producers shall stand in direct relation to the community for whom production is carried out, so that their responsibility to it may be obvious, not lost, as at present, through their immediate subordination to shareholders whose interest is not service but gain; and
- that the obligation for the maintenance of the service shall rest upon the professional organisations that perform it, and that, subject to the supervision and criticism of the consumer, those organisations shall exercise as much voice in the government of industry as may be needed to ensure that the obligation is discharged.

Function is wrapped up in notions of the common good. A community's appreciation of what this might entail changes with time. Purpose provides the rationale for industry including other social and economic activity.

[This article was published in *Karyawan*, Vol.9, Issue 1, July 2008.]