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SOLUTIONS

OUR CHANGED AND CHANGING WORLD

Most observers would acknowledge that the world has changed dramatically since the end of the 19th century. Much of the change has been beneficial, but not all. Look at the climate crisis, Hurricane Ian, and other storms and draughts around the globe. Look at the number of authoritarian regimes that now exist, and the Ukrainian war.

Economist and economic historian J. Bradford DeLong, deputy assistant Secretary at the U.S. Treasury under President Clinton, has written an economic and social summary of our civilization between 1870 and 2010, using the 2008 financial crisis as an end point. He has titled it, SLOUCHING TOWARDS UTOPIA. What he details are the large-scale developments that brought many of the changes we now live with. These include: globalization, population increase, industrial research and implementation, and the modern corporation. A number of populations, though not all, have been able to escape poverty, avoid violence, and live longer. These increasing numbers come

up with more ideas, better organization, and means to preserve themselves, and the world they live in.

But there are problems too. Among those that DeLong lists are: population congestion, limited resources, and the uneven distribution of material prosperity. These, along with political disharmony, leave many deeply dissatisfied. In fact he warns that a majority of citizens are not content with material wealth. What we need, he urges, is to pursue *justice*, not “mere productivity and abundance.” And progress in this arena of human activity has not kept pace with progress in other areas. While many lead longer and healthier lives, many are not content with these achievements, and want to weave in other priorities.

One of the continuing sources of dissatisfaction that DeLong notes is the competing views of markets. Some believe, while others doubt, that markets can be the solutions to social issues. There have been, and still are, advocates for both positions. Little argument can be made to discredit the “productive energy” that capitalism has helped create. But today, a number of smaller nations have seen the need for balance between social needs and economic potential and productivity.

DeLong reminds us that while economics matters, economic policies that ignore social and environmental needs can, and have, led to political disruption and even wars. German discontent with the payments imposed following World War I were in part responsible for attitudes fostering World War II. It remains to be seen whether or not today's economic policies will adjust to environmental and social conditions. In our country certainly, we hear differing opinions over the roles government should play with regard to social well-being, education, and, environmental issues.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of DeLong's book is his acknowledgement that while modern capitalism has proved to be widely, and innovatively, if not universally, beneficial to citizens, there remains the need for adjustments to the social and environmental conditions worldwide - those brought about by the numerous developments in technologies and economies.

