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Divided we fall into inequality gap

Last December in San Antonio, the Philosophical Society of Texas held two days of panel discussions about demographics in Texas, the United States and the world. Two experts unwittingly captured the strong differences of opinion about the "divides" in our society — electronic, economic and educational.



Walt Rostow, professor emeritus of history at the

University of Texas at Austin, spoke about past and present programs to provide economic opportunity to residents of East Austin. His overall message was guardedly pessimistic, which plunged those who know the positive-minded Rostow into gloomy thoughts about the success of such initiatives.

The contrasting speaker was James Adams, retired CEO of Texas Instruments. He saw a brave new electronic world just over the horizon where he could stand on the Great Wall of China with a hand-held videophone and send simultaneous images and sounds to his wife back in the States. In his view, electronic advances would bring about a virtual utopia

As I listened to these two visionaries, I felt like actor Wally Shawn in Louis Malle's "My Dinner With Andre." Shawn sits entranced and bemused for two hours as his dinner companion, director Andre Gregory, recounts his exotic and mystical adventures in Tibet, the Sahara and Poland. An exasperated Shawn finally says something like, "Gee, I don't know. I am happy if I wake up in the morning, and my cold cup of coffee from the night before is sitting on my desk where I left it, and there's no cockroach in it, and I can drink it."

Adams' utopia is for most people what it literally means in Greek: ou-topia or "nowheresville."

That we view what is now and what will be on a split screen is clear from public responses to the report by the Austin Equity Commission as printed in the American-Statesman. Particularly disturbing are the reactions by selected Austin church leaders. One said, "It's asinine. . . . Are they going to move into a socialist concept where we tax the rich more than we do the poor?" Another, "What's equal to you may not be equal to

me." A third, "We all have to be better than somebody else. It's human nature."

The last time I looked, the United States and western European countries tax the wealthy more than the poor, both in actual dollars and in graduated percentages according to income level. This system created a society that until recently offered real opportunity for its citizens and for many new immigrants.

As for the relative meaning of "equality" and the need to "be better" than others in material possessions, one wonders whether these religious leaders took the time to read the AEC report. Is it Marxism to study whether our increasingly fragmented society can make sure that our poorest citizens are not deprived of opportunity, while the privileged fulfill their responsibilities to the society that made them rich?

Perhaps refresher courses in the Old and New Testaments would help. I recommend starting with Deuteronomy 15: 7-10: "[D]o not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your poor brother . . . Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart." In an age when the most fortunate among us live in gated communities and others of us hardly know our next-door neighbors, much rather the people who live on either side of Interstate 35, the social generosity called for in Deuteronomy might best be put into practice by our government.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1990 the top annual income of the lowest quintile of American households was \$15,933. In 1999, the same households earned \$17,196. Nineteen percent of American households made less. Income for the lowest of the upper 5 percent of households increased during the same period from \$120,773 to \$142,021. The increase of \$1,263 for poor households will not pay for a home computer and the Internet services needed for families to use the World Wide Web at home. The increase of \$21,248, even after taxes, will pay for a state-of-the-art home computer, high-speed Internet links, a portable laptop and two round trips to China.

In the near future, Mr. and Mrs. James Adams might stand transmitting sights and sounds from the Great Wall, but who Stateside will have the means to receive their electronic signals?

Palaima recommends reading Roger Ebert's review of "My Dinner with Andre" at http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1999/01/andre1118.html.