

# *The Affluent Society*

John Kenneth Galbraith

## Introduction

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith earned his PhD at the University of California, Berkeley and spent most of his academic career at Harvard University. He worked at the Department of Agriculture during the New Deal, served as deputy head of the Office of Price Administration during World War II, ran the Office of Economic Security Policy during the early years of the Cold War, and served as the Ambassador to India during John F. Kennedy's presidency.

America's uneven economic development from the Great Depression of the 1930s through the prosperity of the 1950s disturbed Galbraith, who thought the government should invest in infrastructure, public education, and programs to alleviate poverty. Instead, most of the wealth went into the private sector, exacerbating the growing concentration of wealth in the private sector.

One of Galbraith's most influential works, *The Affluent Society*, published in 1958, warned against the explosion of consumerism following WWII made possible by federal policies like the G.I. Bill, the Federal Highway Act, and Housing Act of 1949. The following excerpt comes from chapter 17: The Theory of Social Balance<sup>1</sup>.

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## Primary Source

Columbus State Community College students can access [\*The Affluent Society\*](#) through the library's EBSCO eBook collection. Click on the title to access the reading<sup>2</sup>. Please read chapter 17.

For students attending Ohio colleges or universities with libraries that can access the OhioLINK catalog, Galbraith's book, [\*The Affluent Society\*](#), can be accessed online through OhioLINK.

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<sup>1</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 1958.

<sup>2</sup><http://csccl.ohionet.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie.ip.uid&db=nlebk&AN=25960&site=ehost-live>

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<sup>3</sup> Prescient comment (referencing or showing knowledge about events to come), especially the reference to climate change.

<sup>4</sup> The Gross national product (GNP) refers to the value of all goods and services produced by country during the course of a year. This includes production and services in the United States as well as foreign products.

<sup>5</sup> To replace the “sex crimes” of the 1920s, perhaps? People were equally concerned about the dangerous influence of television on the morals of young people. Also rock and roll, the latest incarnation of the “devil’s music”

<sup>6</sup> The “Ancien Régime” refers to the traditional French social structure made up of four “estates.” The First Estate consists of the clergy (France is primarily Catholic), the Second Estate refers to the monarchy, nobility, and the political class. The Third Estate includes the peasantry and bourgeois (traditional French term for the merchant classes, i.e., the middle class). The Fourth Estate refers to those outside of the traditional social hierarchy, most notably a free and independent press. The suffering and abuse of the Third Estate, and the suppression of the Fourth Estate, led directly to the French Revolution in 1789.

<sup>7</sup> Ineluctable means inevitable or something that cannot be ignored.

<sup>8</sup> The Middle Class can travel through the Southside of Chicago and the Deep South without seeing the poverty surrounding them.