

## Straws in the Wind

"One would suppose that Socialists would be very happy in Vienna, for rent and fixed interest have disappeared and with them the hated middle classes. For this advantage all true socialists ought to be grateful to the Treaty of Versailles, which has done most to deliver their country from the burdens of the middle and upper classes. Yet I heard no expression of gratitude; so incalculable is man." (\*)

AND so incalculable are the vagaries of bourgeois philosophy. If the tumbling process is the result of socialism, how comes it that the same socialism does not as mightily humble the same classes in France, in Britain and America? It is quite as virulent in those countries as in Germany and Austria, quite as responsive to the slogan of "immediate interests," and fully as patriotic to "their" country. And if such is the latest conclusion of liberal sapience, it is small wonder that the "stepping heavenward" brand of continental socialism—fluttering the borrowed rags of democracy—should stagnate in the Dead Sea of philistine idealism.

Over the fall, and suffering of the middle classes there is much ado. It is ominous and "fellowfeeling makes us wondrous kind." Experience of the class psychology of comfortable success induces a sympathy of understanding that is wholly absent in the presence of the far greater and more prolonged privations of the wage-slaves in the daily yoke of exploitation. Coupled, perhaps, with a vague fear for the final results of comfortable apathy, callous charity and insatiable greed, thus rudely impressed on the conscious chaos of their tottering supremacy.

Capital condemns society to hardship and ignorance. Its incentive and enterprise oscillate between those two points. It voids the talents of man, vitiates the genius of humanity. And its "success"—gilded with the tinfoil of egoism—depends not on the welfare of society, but on its deepening degradation. But the fallen middle class, and the anxious beneficiaries of commerce, about to fall, may take comfort in the assurance that their miseries will be short. For the system of which they are a worthy expression is definitely come to maturity and is "whitening to the harvest." Yet, even in decay, the type runs true. For the same writer says: "who are the people that crowd the opera house? Some are foreigners who have come—under the mistaken idea that living is cheap. A few are bankers, and other profiteers. The majority are relics of the middle classes selling their treasures, and enjoying life while there is a treasure left to sell." Cheapness, selling, profiteering, the holy trinity of success. And incidentally, it gives us an insight into their notions of suffering.

The fall of the middle classes, and their miseries, is neither the aim of socialism nor has it been brought about through socialism. It is wholly and entirely a product of bourgeois economy. The inevitable result of commercial enterprise and business acumen. The treaty of Versailles—wholly dictated by the political exigencies of business and finance—made Germany a pariah, and forbade her even the vaunted "freedom" of Liberalism. The Treaty of St. Germain partitioned Austria and flung her headlong among a revenging pack of trade competitors. She was ringed round with Customs Unions, business restrictions and foreign finance. She was cut off from her wonted exchange. And being cut off from the fount of her wealth, the beneficiaries of that wealth—the self complaisant middle classes and with them the professionals—were brought down from the murky vaults of idealist individualism, to the virgin earth of material reality. But their heads are still confused with the shock, and they are completely unable to realise the significance of the "evil" that has come upon them, or (characteristically enough) to distinguish between the socialist industry, which would prosper humanity and the commercial business that has ruined it.

Socialism means the levelling of class society,

not the levelling of the middle classes. The aim of socialism is not the destruction of man and property but the destruction of property right in the social means of life. It is founded, not on the altruism of moral relations, but on the deeper altruism of social and material fact. It expresses itself through no romantic appeal, or emotional moonshine, but through social perception of social change in the logical sequences of causation. And if it goes by way of a social dictatorship it is only as a means to an end. Because the social connection with the old political society forces it through the stormed ruts of autocracy to the realisation of socialised necessities. So that the weapons by which, or through which, it will be accomplished, can be neither the "absolute principle" of justice nor the petty reforms of "democrats," but by the progressive development of the inherent antagonisms of private property and social production in the artificial organisation of political society. To understand this is to understand society in general and socialism in particular; is to understand that socialism is not a thing nor a magic formula but a cycle of social evolution. If the general relations of social organisation can be comprehended, cognisance of the general drift of development may follow. On that cognisance lies the power to turn social energy away from the struggling confusions of sect and party; from class concepts of "right" and individual figments of "good," to the more fruitful preparations for the coming change and to abstract from that change every possible element of violence and chaos. When we have achieved unity of perception we shall have achieved all the unity that is necessary—or possible.

The fall of the middle class is not important; nor is the failure of its philosophy a calamity. The worthlessness of that philosophy has long been apparent, its idealism a long standing insincerity. And its failure, involving as it does the class whose material it is, implies no portentous destruction of society. It is merely the destruction of a commercial interest cankered with lust of possession, and whose life stream has become foul with political obsessions. It is the necessary prelude to a civilisation whose fundament is not the "eternal right" of a transient propertied class, but the social unity of common possession; of a society whose progress is unfettered by private gain; whose individualism shall grow to full stature in the heightened glory of social prosperity; and whose people shall no more be overwhelmed with the terrible burdens of Imperialist speculations.

(\*) Henry Nevinson, in the "Manchester Guardian, October 13, 1922.

## Life in Soviet Russia

### THE CIVIL CODE

The Civil Code which has just been adopted by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee is the legal embodiment of the principles underlying the new economic policy, i.e., the permission of private commerce and small industry, within the general system of State ownership, State trade, and large-scale State industry.

The new economic policy is not a return to the economic system which existed before the revolution, and the Civil Code does not restore the old legal rights as they existed in Russia before the revolution. There are distinct limitations to the activities of private capitalism in Russia.

The Code permits two forms of ownership, and the overwhelming predominance of the former is preserved. The land, with the riches it contains, the water, the railways, etc., are owned by the whole people; they are commodities absolutely withdrawn from private ownership.

On the other hand, in order to encourage private initiative in trade and industry, the Code defines the commodities that may become privately owned.

They are non-municipalised buildings; enterprises employing not more than a legally fixed number of hired workers; tools, machinery, and other means of production; currency, securities, and other valuables, including gold and silver coin; articles of domestic and personal use, goods which may legally form the objects of trade and so forth.

Certain State enterprises may be transferred temporarily to private exploitation, but only on a concessionary basis.

But even in the objects so defined, private ownership, as conferred by the Civil Code, does not imply that sacred, inviolable, and inalienable right which it bears in other countries. There are important conditions limiting the enjoyment of private property in objects of public utility; one is that the Code defines how these properties are to be exploited and how they may be disposed of; a second is that their exploitation must involve an element of public service, i.e., it must contribute to the enlargement of the productive forces of the country. Just as in the law socialising the land there is a provision that the State may sequester land which is not being employed by its owners, so the Civil Code provides that the State need not respect the rights of private owners where these are using their possessions contrary to the good of the public. "Only with the purpose of developing the productive force of the country," runs the Code, "does the R.S.F.S.R. permit private individuals the civil right to property."

It should be clear that in no way is the Code concerned with former owners of property expropriated by the revolution, and to leave no misunderstanding on this head the Code contains a special clause to the effect that former owners have no claim to the return of properties expropriated under revolutionary law, or which passed into the social possession of the workers before May 22, 1922.

The Code contains various provisions regulating private possession and commerce; the right of building, bequest, mortgage; and the contractual obligations; hire, purchase and sale, loan, tender, guarantee, attorney, insurance, company formation, etc.

Private building is permitted by the Code. The destructive consequences of seven years' war have made it necessary to encourage private initiative in this direction. Building leases are limited to forty-nine years, during which period the rights to possession, leasing, and disposition are enjoyed. The plots on which structures are built are, however, the inalienable property of the State.

The Code permits inheritance, either by legal title or by testament, but the property left by a deceased person can be bequeathed only to the total sum of 10,000 gold roubles (approximately \$5,000); the remainder passes into the possession of the State. Moreover, the persons who may form the subjects of bequest are limited to direct descendants, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, the widow or widower of the deceased, and incapacitated persons who were dependent upon the support of the deceased for at least a year prior to his death.

The contractual obligations are essential for the protection and regulation of the private initiative and enterprise which the new economic policy has called into existence. Private persons must be able to conclude contracts in the knowledge that the State can be called in, if necessary, to enforce their fulfilment. On the other hand, according to Soviet law, a contract is not entirely an affair of the free will of the contracting parties. The State has a right to step in and annul a contract which is patently injurious to the public good. The Code lays down that even a private contract between individual citizens is a public concern. In accordance with this principle all questions of dispute arising out of private contracts must be decided in the public courts, so as to prevent the stronger person imposing on the weaker. In principle, the State is an interested party in all contracts.

These few simple principles form the basis of the whole Civil Code, and distinguish its provisions from the civil rights and obligations now in force in other countries.

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