

By the Way

TO a great degree, I attribute the demoralization within the working class movement, so far as the personal aspect of causation is concerned, to the presence of an uncritical romanticism in our theorizing on the problem of social change and to the destructive activities of undisciplined impulse. Partly, the romantic character of the theorizing may be traced to a faith in instinct (give them slogans) and to the vestigial remains in our materialist philosophy of an out-of-date Hegelianism which, in its day, imputed a spiritual quality to what modern science sees as merely the play of mechanical forces. These romantic elements of our thinking along with the frequent exhibitions of undisciplined impulse, I take to be signs of our immaturity. Now a mark of maturity in mental life is the habit of rigorous introspection and self-criticism. As we take on that habit, we shall have fewer illusions and more self-discipline; and although we can never avoid the shocks of experience, we shall meet them more steadily and without loss of morale. As we mature, we shall not be tardy in acknowledging mistakes but be eager to do so for the good of the movement.

It is easy to criticise, especially when faults are so glaring; though it is also a graceless task when they are so very human and therefore very common, so common that the critic must have the hardihood to say, "do as I say not as I practice." Criticism, then, is only justified as it is intended to enter into our lives as a factor of the environment influencing us for the better. It serves best when it is not only destructive but also suggests better standards of thought and conduct. The working class movement needs a better philosophy to rescue it from what is nothing less than demoralization. The reign of reason should be established as a restraining influence, as a moral discipline over the vagaries of irrational impulse so destructive of solidarity and productive of apathy. The active interest of the producing masses will be aroused, solidarity be achieved and control over circumstances established in degree as hard thinking on the social problem assisted by positive science disciplines us into a more single-minded interest in the good of the movement.

In these articles, according to my lights, I am trying to do my bit in bringing on the reign of reason in the movement, by continuing to suggest to the active elements that the social revolution is the task of the producing masses; that economic, political and educational activities are all necessary departmental activities; that the respective organizations should not be competing against each other for working class support, but should be looked upon as organs functioning in a mutual enterprise. Further, I am also suggesting that it is the beginning of wisdom to deal with that which confronts us in the present as our only means of control over the future. The future should not be looked upon as a distant goal but as something we are continually growing up into; and that, in dealing with the present, we should aim to establish changes that would become new cultural influences in the environment, creating and strengthening habits and mental dispositions which would in turn become levers for other changes in the environment—a process of interaction between man and his environment in which changes in both may be more continuous with each other than in the past. I am not such an optimist as to expect our various organizations to be so sensible as to issue proclamations and to reorganize to that effect. All I may hope to do is to throw a light on the movement from an angle which may help develop an appreciation of our respective functions and so lead to a better disposition, reducing the frictions amongst us.

On my way I shall now take a flying kick at the cataclysmic theory of social change, another of many socialist preconceptions needing one. The

theory pictures humanity in a state of inertia, existing so until, under an accumulation of social misery no longer bearable, a mass movement launches itself against the barriers to social betterment. The grounds of my animosity against this theory are several. Examining the concept, you will see that the thought of cataclysm involves also thinking of inertia—in nature, the rigid crust of earth; in society, the crust of custom. But we should never forget that written history is a description in dramatic form, unavoidably foreshortening to a few pages social changes that may have occurred over considerable time and of which the more catastrophic features have been more or less local. Then again, the magic of suggestion in words and phrases deceives. There is a large stock of terms and phrases evolved in war and military life and in describing the more impressive occurrences in nature which, when applied to the scene of political activity and social change, almost always, even with those conscious of the danger, retain a suggestiveness all their own, long recognized as the source of much error. If, then, we have to beware that our conception of a cataclysmic situation in society does not approximate too closely the sudden convulsive character of earth quakes, we have also to beware of society as existing in any such state as that of inertia.

It is true that established custom and institution may exist for long periods but that is because they are more or less flexible or adaptable. As changes in the material conditions of life bring on alterations in the standards of belief and knowledge, these in turn bring on changes in law and custom. Institutions may grow in strength and their influence extend, or their scope and influence may decline to the point of disuse; or, they may be thrown violently overboard, all as the changing needs of a community determine. Changes go on in law and custom and institution because man acts anyway, he can't help acting. Seen as a period in history, the movement in society may be one of conserving the present or of advancing or of going backward; and internal struggle more or less severe will accompany all of them, though the story of the struggle be lost to other generations. I think what we know of the ancient city civilizations of Asia proves that And if Carthage or Greece fell before a superior civilization in that of Rome it was because of Rome's superior capacity to organize human forces into a military imperialism. Rome finally fell after centuries of decline, weakened internally by social antagonisms and corruption and before the repeated assaults of the hosts of barbarism. Inertia anyway, never describes adequately the state of man.

To apply the term cataclysmic to the manner in which political and institutional changes have occurred in Europe since the fall of Rome, is to stretch the term beyond reasonableness, turbulent as has been European history. Most of this note I lift bodily from Beards "Economic Basis of Politics" and set it down here over against the theory of cataclysmic change:—

"Without any conscious design, but by the contribution of many forces and circumstances there evolved in the various states of Europe a representative system of 'estates' superseding the simple sword-won depotism of war leader, baron, prince or king. Sometimes it was the resistance of a particular economic group to royal despotism that won for it a recognised share in the government. An example of this is afforded by the contest which ended in the grant of Magna Charta. The barons wrote their interest in the public law of England, and secured it by obtaining the right of actual participation as a class in the control of Government. At other times kings, especially during wars of conquest, found themselves straitened for funds, and they called upon certain classes or groups to fill their treasury. Such, for instance, was the origin of the English House of Commons. To the continued financial necessity of the English kings, particularly during the long war with France, was due the extraordinary development of the English Parliament. Whatever the circumstances in each particular case, the striking

fact is that we find all over Europe what Dr. Stubbs calls, 'National assemblies composed classes.'"

These classes were as follows, four in number: the clergy—(partly as a spiritual interest, in the main, as a body of landed proprietors) the baronage, the smaller landed gentry, and the burgesses of the towns. It is not, however, until our own days that all the commonalty of the realm find representation in the legislative chamber. Beard points out that,

"The term 'commons' does not derive its meaning as is often erroneously supposed from any connection with 'the common people.' On the contrary it comes from the vague word *communitas* which was used in the middle ages to describe a political organism such as a country or chartered town. The House of Commons therefore, was in reality the house of the *communitates*, composed of representatives of the gentry of the country and the burgesses of the towns considered as collective bodies within their respective geographical areas."

British political development has been far from cataclysmic. In the main it has been one of compromise, though carrying, as everywhere, whatever the method, much popular defeat. Violence from time to time, peasant revolts and a Cromwellian rebellion, but violence has not been universally the sole direct lever of change, nor as important a one as some believe. As to the future, he is a bold man who predicts. But it can be laid down that there is no particular outcome pre-ordained. In the Book of Fate the future is a blank page. I further suggest that the cataclysmic theory is nine-tenths psychological in those who hold it. It is not for nothing that it has in all ages been the pet theory of minorities. Witness the early Christians, submerged under the immovable bulk of Rome. The year 1000 was to see the end of that dispensation and the Son of God was to return in majesty to rule the world. In history the theory crops up again and again in many forms; it is, in fact, contemporaneous at all times with poor frustrated human nature. Like poetry is said to be, it is unrealized actuality realized in fancy.

The stressing of the part played by violence in history to the exclusion of other ways and means of change is a dangerous and irresponsible flattery of the bitter humour of those who feel their oppression strongly. By suggestion the problem of change is simplified for people who do not want to think, to the one method. It discourages the quest and trial of other ways and means; it discourages the effort to educate and create a massed public opinion; it discourages a day to day struggle and the study of immediate problems. Instinct is the thing, not Reason; and the ideal proletariat are sheep led by the "knowing" few—to be slaughtered by machine gun, bombing plane and poison gas. The days of the barricades are gone. Furthermore the ways and means, the technology of production and distribution of modern industrial and commercial communities is a delicately balanced, intricate mechanism of relation with all regions in the wide world, and the life of these communities has come to rest precariously but also absolutely on the maintenance of these relations. Therefore, so far the lessons of history fail because the technology of military power and the technology of economic processes in modern life are new and without example in previous history. So far, then, the present situation must be studied on its own merits because a collapse of economic life from whatever reasons would bring on turmoil and famine among millions. conditions least favorable for constructing a new order, and almost surely lead to generations of reaction. So far, then, in the face of the present situation as I can see it, the socialist, working for a better order, should not lay stress on the violence that has accompanied historical change to the exclusion of its other methods thus creating a disposition to look to violence. In fact, this social revolution, as others in the past have finally had to do however starved their ideals, must make terms with the technological facts, the ways and means of productive life—now, or perhaps never. And to resign the cause to the one method of violence is to announce bankruptcy in morale and contriving intelligence.