

Economic Unity and Political Unity

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By Bertrand Russell, English Publicist.

THE political unity of the world, which is the avowed aim of the League of Nations, may or may not be achieved in the next few years; indeed, any but a very bold optimist must decline to the view that it will not. But the economic unity of the world has been furthered by the war to a very surprising extent. Conditions are, of course, still abnormal, but we may expect much of what has resulted in the way of international economic government to remain for a long time to come. Certain Powers, notably the United States and the British Empire, control the supplies of food and raw material sufficiently to be able to decide, throughout the greater part of the civilized world, who shall starve and who shall have enough to eat, who shall be allowed to develop industries and who shall be compelled to import manufactured goods. This power is the result partly of geographical advantages, partly of armed force, especially at sea. Financial strength also plays its part, but is a result of geographical and military superiority rather than an independent cause of dominion. If Germany had won the war, it may be assumed that indemnities would have fundamentally altered the balance of financial strength.

The necessity of rationing supplies has created, unavoidably, an international way of dealing with problems of distribution. Those who control international distribution have a degree of power exceeding anything previously known in the history of the world. The growth of industrialism in the century before the war led most nations to become dependent upon foreign countries for supplies indispensable to life or at least to prosperity. Cessation of foreign supplies would mean inability to support the actual population in health, as it has meant in Germany. Consequently it is impossible for any European nation to return to economic independence except through a period of intolerable hardship, involving death or emigration on a large scale. Only extreme heroism prolonged through many years would enable a continental country to free itself from the economic dominion which has resulted from the war. This economic dominion has given to the world, as regards material things, a new unity and a new central authority.

But while material unity has been more or less accidentally achieved, unity in any higher sense has not been even approached. The League of Nations, so far from being world-wide, is in effect an alliance of America, Britain and France, with Italy as a somewhat doubtful hanger-on. Japan, which is nominally a member of the League, is mainly engaged in the attempt to absorb China—an enterprise by no means calculated to win the effect of America. From the Pacific to the Rhine, the League of Nations, appears as an enemy or a master, not as a free union of equal democracies. The world is thus divided into three groups; the Western nations, the outcasts, Germany and Russia, and the Yellow Races—among whom the Japanese are masters and the Chinese unwilling servants. It is in such a world that the League of Nations is to make its debut.

The distinction of capitalist and proletarian has been made familiar by the writings of the Socialists. But this distinction has now taken a new form: there are capitalist and proletarian nations. Russia and Germany are proletarian nations, the former still on strike, the latter probably about to make a sullen submission. By the economic provisions of the Peace Treaty, it is secured (as far as such things can be) that Germans shall, for an indefinite time to come, be very much poorer than inhabitants of the Western democracies. They are to do specified work for the capitalist nations, obtaining presumably wages, but not profits. They are to be deprived of an enormous proportion of their ships, coal and iron, and in every way prevented from competing with our trade. If they nevertheless do find ways of making money, they are to be deprived of what they make in order to provide reparation for the war. Their national

situation, in short, is to be as similar as possible to the individual situation of a wage-earner in a capitalist community. Their reward for accepting our terms is to be that they are to have enough to eat to support life; their punishment for rejecting them that their numbers are to be reduced by starvation until they submit. (This is a slight exaggeration of our generosity. At a moment when large numbers of German infants are dying for lack of milk, the Peace Treaty demands the surrender by Germany of a hundred and forty thousands of milk-cows.) In industrial disputes, we are accustomed to subjugation of strikers by these means. But it marks the growth of economic ways of thought that the methods of labor disputes should be applied in dealing with a vanquished nation.

As to Russia, it is as yet impossible to know what will happen. It is conceivable that, by sufficient determination, Russia may succeed in becoming economically self-sufficient. If so, war-weariness may compel the Allies to abandon the policy of intervention. But if Russia is not willing to face the hardships involved in an economic boycott, or if the Allies can raise sufficient armies to occupy the centres of Bolshevik power, it will become necessary for the Russians, as for the Germans, to submit to our terms and accept whatever form of government we may think good for them. The Germans were informed that we should be more lenient if they expelled the Kaiser; probably the Russians will soon be informed that we shall be more lenient if they restore the Tsardom. In that case, no doubt, they, like the Germans, may be granted a peace of justice and mercy, not of revenge. The peace terms seem to me to combine justice with mercy.—The Bishop of London.) But if they persist in Bolshevism, we may discover what it is the Germans have been spared as a consequence of their adoption of democracy.

We see, in two cases of Germany and Russia, the two purposes for which the power of the sword is being used, namely (a) to extort economic advantages; (b) to impose a form of government other than that desired by those upon whom it is imposed. I do not wish to blame in any way the individuals who are carrying out these two purposes. I believe that many of them are completely blind to what is really happening; they feel that Germany, as the disturber of the peace, must be rendered harmless, and that Russia, as the perpetrator of endless atrocities against the well-to-do, must be forced to adopt again the "civilized" government which it enjoyed before the Revolution, whose much greater atrocities they forget because the capitalist press did not exploit them. Others though they may see and regret the evil that is being done, accept it as inevitable in order to inaugurate the League of Nations; and in the disarmament of Germany they see the first step towards universal disarmament. Many others, again, sincerely believe that it is the business of a statesman to think only of the interests of his own country; they feel themselves in the position of trustees, and regard "sacred egoism" as their duty. For all these reasons, it would be foolish to attach moral blame to those who direct the power of the Allies. Like everybody else, they are products of circumstances and systems. We have to understand their action, and to form an opinion as to whether it is for the good of the world; but if our opinion is adverse, we must go behind the men to the system which has produced them, and ask ourselves whether, under that system, anything better could be expected.

The capitalist system of industry, whatever its merits, has not been found conducive to perfect harmony between capital and labor. It is hardly to be expected that its extension to international

relations will produce harmony between States or that Germany and Russia will be filled with ardent love for the Western nations during the next few years. They may be powerless in a military sense, just as labor organizations are; but, like labor organizations, they may find other ways than war by which their grievances can be forced upon the attention of their masters. I do not wish to be misunderstood when I speak of "grievances;" what I am saying is wholly independent of the question whether they are justified in feeling grievances. I say only that they will feel them, and that in fact their economic position will be less fortunate than ours, as a result of their defeat in the war. And this situation is not one likely to inaugurate a period of international amity, or to realize the dreams of those who died in France believing that our aim was to destroy militarism and establish universal freedom.

It is economic considerations mainly that have caused the severity of the peace terms and the implacable hostility to the Bolsheviks. (Those who think the hostility to the Bolsheviks is due to their atrocities are putting the cart before the horse, and are failing to realize how their own horror of these atrocities has been stimulated. The Tsar's government was guilty of many more and much worse atrocities, but it was not to the interest of the capitalist press to make our blood boil about them.) Economic consideration of this sort are inseparable from the capitalist system. Probably every allied nation, as a whole, will be worse off economically if Germany and Russia are ruined than if they are prosperous, but many individual capitalists will profit by the removal of competitors, and these individuals, through the press, have power to mold public opinion. Moreover, under the existing economic system competition is the very air we breathe, and men come to feel more pleasure in outstripping a competition than in the absolute level of their prosperity. If, by slightly impoverishing ourselves, we can very greatly impoverish the Germans, we feel that we have achieved a valuable result. This state of mind is so bound up with capitalism that we can not hope to see it effectively removed while capitalism persists.

I do not despair of the world; I do not think it impossible that the idealistic aims which inspired many of those who fought in the war may in time be achieved. But I think a lesson is to be learned from President Wilson's failure, and the lesson is this: The removal of international rivalry, and the growth of real co-operation among all civilized nations, is not to be attained while competition, exploitation, and the ruthless use of economic power govern the whole machinery of production and distribution. It is scarcely to be expected that the relations between States will be immeasurably more humane than the relations between individuals within a State. So long as the whole organized machinery of the State is used to defend men who live in luxury on the labor of others, and to obstruct those others in attempts to secure a more just system, the natural assumptions of men who possess authority can scarcely be such as to restrain them from a ruthless use of force in their dealings with hostile countries. International justice and lasting peace are not to be secured while capitalism persists.

It is especially in America that belief in fundamental economic reconstruction is needed. America has always stood for the ideas which are now known as "Liberal." In 1776, these ideas, as embodied in the Declaration of Independence, represented the Extreme Left, just as much as Bolshevism does now. But even the most advanced ideas can not be allowed to stand still for a century and a half without finding themselves outstripped by later comers. Liberal ideas are admirable in circumstances which allow a prosperous career to any tolerably vigorous person. Americans with an immensely rich and fertile continent waiting for their

(Continued On Page Six.)