

By the Way

BEFORE continuing from last issue the exposition of my views on social reform and my argument for the adoption of the concept of "function" as the basis of distinction between working class organisations, educational, political and economic, reformist and revolutionary, I must thank the Editor and those who control the Clarion policy for allowing me to express at such length views in some particulars at variance with the official attitude of the Party. *

There may be readers who doubt the wisdom of opening the Clarion columns to such views, contending that, in the interest of clarity and of maintaining a consistent attitude, the Party organ should be exclusively devoted to propagating only those views and policies which have received the Party's endorsement. As laying down a general rule, I think the contention a wise one. Nevertheless, I also think it wise for the rule to be lifted from time to time if only to direct interest to fundamentals. And just now, when there is a lull in the movement and reflection rather than activity is the order of the day, there is offered a favorable opportunity. An additional reason for lifting the rule exists, I believe, in the necessity for reconsidering our pre-war conceptions of the problem of social change in the light of subsequent experiences; which, while like all new experiences they contained features unique, were also uncommonplace in that they were of an unprecedented scale and social significance. We have witnessed for instance the easy reestablishment, or rather, reassertion of the spirit of nationalism over class solidarity among the masses everywhere: We have experienced the (unexpected) enduring qualities of the capitalist system under the stress and strain of international war and its aftermath of economic and political anarchy, social distress, discontent and moral and physical degeneration, particularly in Europe and Asia. And we have seen the Russian revolution and the attempt to rebuild social life in that country on a new basis of production for use instead of for profit.

Have we, then, consciously tested our pre-war conceptions in the dry light of reason and our new experiences, or have these experiences passed us by like ships in the night, leaving nothing but a sentimental memory behind? I feel there is a self-satisfied complacency among us of a kind such as has ever marked the "keepers of the received word," a complacency I am moved to disturb. For it is a complacency unresponsive to experience and hostile to objective facts. Where that spirit is, there is no eagerness to learn what new experience may have to teach; and the habit of learning and the acquiring of the habit of learning is discouraged. Then there springs up a paralyzing philosophy of

* Editor's Note: "The Editor and those who control the Clarion policy" are very grateful for any appreciative references that come their way. It will not do, however, to let it be supposed that the Clarion columns have been generally closed to the discussion of views expressed as contrary to those we have seemingly adopted as our own. Indeed, investigation would more likely reveal the contents of the W. P. B. to be made up of MSS. intended to support—rather than to amend or oppose—those views. So we part with the compliment with a sigh. And, anyway, how ill-natured they must be who did not respond to the persuasive warmth of "C's" approaches in setting forth the result of his observation and study, to say nothing of his inimitable style. We warn our readers against those apologies of his. They are but the weapons of a skilled controversialist, designed to disarm unwary opponents, all, of course, for their own good.

"know-nothingism." The "keepers" have all the facts within them they care about—a great faith, desire and will: "All good things, Brother!" but they are in abundance in every creed and party! They need to be reinforced by knowledge. And no previous generation has had at its disposal such an accumulation of scientific criteria as ours for a searching analysis of the phenomena of its time. Nor by virtue of our highly organized and rapid means of collecting and distributing news and information, has any previous generation had such an opportunity to study at first hand and on so grand a scale the mass reactions of men to unwonted social stimuli.

Taking as the thesis of his analysis of the main sources of power in modern communities (beginning in the New York "Freeman" of May 2.) that, "mental power is the ultimate source of both economic and military power," Bertrand Russell says, "that power, even the most monarchical, requires a popular basis, either in the opinion of some large group, or in its traditions and habits." And he adds, "Tradition and habit strong as they are, are diminishing forces in our kaleidoscopic world. Thus opinion becomes the decisive factor in determining who is to hold power in the future."

Russell is right, I think, in so far as the question of power is concerned; but there are still levels of social life but little capable of being disturbed by gusts of opinion, and where power, political or economic, no matter how strong or ruthlessly wielded, finds itself all but impotent. It is down in the lower levels of work-a-day life, remote from the high affairs of State, that custom and habit and private interest have their strongest grip on the lives of the peoples, and where proposals for sweeping social change must settle accounts with those stubborn, irrational elements of social inertia. There is more to the problem of change than the question of power. It is not, in this day and generation, merely a question of issuing decrees, or reforming certain points in the political relations of men, but of modifying the whole of the economic relations of society; which is to say, the modifying of a goodly number of age-long community habits.

While writing the above I had in mind Russia when the socialist ideal, "Production for use instead of production for profit" had suddenly to materialize into something cut and dried, had to become an engineering proposition as well as a slogan, had to displace the old system of production supplying the population with its every day necessities of life. Were there any revolutionaries, then or now, in Russia or elsewhere, who thought or still think, that when once desire and intellectual conviction for change are kindled that change can proceed forthwith unretarded by the inert force of social habit? Is it yet sensed that the active life of communities is a web of custom, convention and habit, connected with interests and ways of doing things that are social, industrial, economic, cultural and political, with relations between individuals, between town and country, trades, villages, cities and regions? These customary, ways of a community, formed into a co-ordinated system through numberless generations, are the channels in which the life of thought and activity runs, in the main, smoothly and automatically by sheer force of repetition. In that way of looking at them these established ways of life are acquired skills and arts which have also the propelling force of habit. Without the capacity to take them on as such we should be for ever novices, fumbling the game of life worse even than the Patagonian thrown into the social life of a civilized community. For he has the rudimentary habits of social life and the capacity to acquire new ones.

Revolutions have never fully realized the hopes

of revolutionaries. Launched on tidal waves of popular feeling, as water finding its level they have subsided, exhausted alongside where stubborn and settled habits refused to yield any further. The revolutions of the past have been political rather than social and only indirectly and at long remove did they affect the bulk of social habits: A spendthrift debauchee or warrior monarch and his tax eating retainers removed, or the parasitic grip of some privileged class loosened, and industry and commerce expands and develops in the new freedom. Together with a greater prosperity, there may come gradually, generation by generation, a change in the state of the industrial arts. Should this happen it is epoch making. For not alone do work-day habits of life change according as the new method of production determines, but if it endures, as time goes on it conditions and stamps its character on all the rest of social life, economic, political and cultural.

Attracted by the dramatic quality of violent revolutionary changes, which, in the main may be characterized as the last ditch stands of reaction, we are apt to miss the continuous and comparatively peaceable changes and modifications that take place in habits of life and thought, in economic and legal relationships, between individuals and between classes, and in political institutions. As a matter of fact, much of our life works out its own changes without political intervention or aid; the big bulk of legislation is inoperative before the ink is dry on statute books; some of it merely sanctions what has already happened and the rest takes the judiciary, swarms of lawyers and the army, navy and police and the customs officers to make it effective at about ten cents income to the dollar expenditure; not to speak of the loss of morale in a hang-dog population who realize they are moral defectives in the eyes of the law.

Well, the eighteenth century brought the industrial revolution; and the world has travelled further, helter skelter, in some ways than it had done in the previous twenty centuries. In some other respects it is the same old world, there are still women and kids. Can you imagine the world before the sixteenth century? No steam power on land or sea, none of what we would call machinery, no railroads, no gas, no electric power or light, no telegraph, wire or wireless, no telephone, wire or wireless, no factories or hardly any, no picture shows or theatres for the masses, no newspapers, no Bolsheviks and no starvation for the masses because they produced too much, no motor cars, no submarines, no aeroplanes, no poison gas, no tuberculosis—a hell of a world. In comparison with our modern social condition of world-wide inter-dependency, it was a world of self-sufficient, self-supporting local communities. Their characteristic personal elements were, in industry and commerce, the handicraftsmen and small traders who carried on their pursuits for a livelihood and not for profit in the capitalistic sense; in agriculture, the chief economic interest, were the feudal barons and serfs. "As it is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen!" chanted the priest; swore in his ruder fashion the feudal baron. But the world does move. For though we are inducted into social habit, custom tradition and dogma from birth, not all of native impulse and energy is enchannelled, something escapes. And so, all down the ages the young and old sneer at each other for being old fashioned or new fangled, as the case may be.

And so, motivated by free unused impulse of one kind or another, energies are directed to invention and improvements in industry, and, as a result, a greater surplus of products is set free for exchange. Trade and commerce and intercourse between communities increases. Men pry into the secret processes of nature. Observation, experiment, analysis and classification become principles of a new knowledge. And science, discovery, industry, trade and commerce, side by side down the centuries shape the world of men into what we know it: Not into what we would like it to be. No! Still, there is yet the future.