

Book Review

"THE ENGINEERS AND THE PRICE SYSTEM."—By Thorstein Veblen. Publishers, B. W. Huebsch, New York.

TO begin with, I must make a confession, that I find myself too much in sympathy with Veblen's argument to be critical of it in this review. Criticism, therefore, I will leave to the reader, contenting myself with summarizing the author's argument, which, though far from doing justice to him will, I hope, serve to whet the reader's interest in the subject matter and his desire for the book. As a "Clarion" reviewer, I am primarily interested in education upon social problems, and, in summarizing Veblen's argument without criticism, though I tatter, I trust I may not altogether fall sheer from that high objective.

The contents of the book under review, "The Engineers and the Price System," were first published as a series of articles in the New York "Dial," in 1919. In its totality, the series constitutes a study of the case for a revolutionary overturn of the existing industrial system in the United States. The study mainly directs itself to a consideration of the economy of the modern industrial system, approximately to the following effect—As a technological system it is known as the machine process, being a mechanical structure of interlocking technical processes, all its parts so highly interdependent and balanced among themselves that the due working of any part of the system is conditional on the due working of all the rest. "It is a system of interlocking mechanical processes rather than of skillful manipulation such as characterized the handicraft system, although the skilled craftsman and tools are also an indispensable part of its comprehensive mechanism. It runs to quantity production of specialized and standardized goods and services. For all these reasons it lends itself to systematic control under the direction of industrial experts, skilled technologists, who may be called production engineers for want of a better term. This technological system, as it now stands, is tied on to the price system of bargain and sale for profit. This industrial system is subjected to an analysis as it works out as a going concern affecting the welfare of the community at large." The human factors moving in the foreground of Veblen's study are two classes of individuals, show as occupying strategic positions within the industrial system; first, the business men who have discretionary control over industrial enterprises; and second the technologists who are responsible to the business men for industrial efficiency within the limits set by commercial ends.

As now obtaining industrial plants are subject to the discretionary control of business men who stand only in a pecuniary relation to industrial processes. These industrial processes, being thus operated for profit making are accompanied, of necessity, by vast wastes of material resources and labor through working at competitive cross purposes, and through curtailment of productive activity short of capacity, in the interests of a profitable price. All of which, entails hardships on the underlying population. The overturn of this system involves removing the business control, putting the community's industrial power in charge of technologists, industries to be operated not for profit, but as a straight engineering proposition for supplying the community as a whole with goods and services. This revolutionary overturn entails as corollary to the above, what Veblen has termed, the disallowance of absentee-ownership. Under the credit economy and larger-scale industry, that means the disallowance of capitalist class ownership and control of those type industries and the vesting ownership and control in the community as a whole.

Out of his preliminary discussion of the price system, our author derives, for him, two important conclusions, one, that the price system is evolving to a state of collapse in the not distant, but unspecified future; and second, that the production engineers are indispensable to a movement of successful overturn. The continued advance of mechanical tech-

nology has called for an ever-increasing volume and diversity of special knowledge. The constant supervision of the production engineers is indispensable to the due working of the technological system. They constitute the general staff of industry whose work it is to control the strategy of production at large and to keep an oversight of the tactics of production in detail. The main lines for working out any practicable revolutionary movement in any advanced industrial country are thus already laid down by the material conditions of industry; and, transient failure to make good in the management of the industrial system would plunge the population into starvation, and defeat any movement of overturn.

For the fuller discussion of the factors leading to the above contention recourse must be had to the book. But whether we agree with Veblen in full as to the indispensability of the production engineers, or merely welcome their voluntary accession to the movement for an overturn as simplifying the problem of a change that much come with or without their voluntary support, our interest may well ask the question: How do the production engineers stand towards a movement for revolutionary overturn? Our first thoughts on the question might not be of a hopeful cast, probably because the more evident, though perhaps relatively superficial, facts about the engineers are their closer affiliation to the business class (including all those who live on free income), by habits of thought bred of social intercourse, than they are with the working masses. Nevertheless, work-day habits of thought; and, when reinforced by instinctive traits, as in the case of the engineers, according to Veblen, they will count for very much in human thought and conduct. In any case, whatever the stimulus, Veblen says the production engineers, particularly the younger generation, are beginning to draw together and take stock and discuss that all-pervading mismanagement of industry that is inseparable from its control for commercial ends; and in the taking stock are becoming "class-conscious," i.e., conscious of themselves as a class having habits of thought that run counter and to a different effect, to the habits of thought of the business men.

Some time ago, I read a review of this book in "The Freeman," in which the reviewer said he detected a weakness in Veblen's philosophy. As many others may have the same objection I will quote the reviewer in part as follows:

"Mr. Veblen sees the industrial problem primarily as a physical one. His analysis discloses that the present system of obtaining and fabricating goods is faulty; and his remedy is, roughly, to put all discretionary authority in the large scale industries in the hands of engineers and production economists, disallowing absentee-ownership in any form. Such a physical change, however, presupposes something like a spiritual conversion—and one is constrained to ask in despair where on earth is that to come from? "Be efficient" is just as much a council of perfection as "Be good"; and there are just as many obstacles in the way of practicing it."

True, but Veblen does not base his forecast on the engineers on the effects, however influential, on "councils of perfection," or on moralizing exhortations to "be efficient" which, in technological matters is synonymous with "be good"; nor does he base it on the strength of pure rational considerations by the engineers. "Pure" rational thought is non-existent in fact. With Veblen it is mainly a question of the instinctive human traits engaged, together with the disciplinary effect of habits of life and work in the formation of habits of thought; under given material conditions, the outcome in conduct depends on the relative strength of all the influencing factors. Lacking other compulsions than a rational one, we might well despair of the social problem.

In lining up this review I sensed difficulties ahead in making Veblen's point of view clear as to the causes of the tendency noted among the engineers, i.e., that their mental reaction to the industrial situation being mainly conditioned on non-rational psychological factors and processes (inherited instinct and acquired mental habit) and not on conscious reasoning alone, the character of the ideas in con-

sciousness, indeed, results from the former. These matters are unfamiliar in our discussions, though in a vague way we have taken account of them. But there is as much need for clear thinking as to the nature of man as there is on the nature of the material environment, if his responses to environmental conditions are to become more calculable, whether as individual, or, as specially concerns us, in the aggregate in occupational groups and social classes within a national aggregate, or as a national aggregate itself. Therefore, in my next paper I shall briefly treat of instincts, more especially of the so-called instinct of workmanship and its relation to other instincts and to acquired habit. I can not write with much confidence on this subject; I shall make mistakes, I hope not too serious ones; but if I stimulate interest in the study of man I shall be satisfied. In this paper I shall mainly lean on Veblen, taking the introduction to his "Instinct of Workmanship," as my guide and mentor. In a third paper I propose to take the "Engineers and the Price System" again, and by a series of excerpts attempt to give the gist of Veblen's argument in that study. Whatever estimate may be put on his final conclusions, there is value in the light his analysis throws on the present system of production.

C. S.

THE THEATRE, OLD AND NEW

The influence on modern art of the development of science is well illustrated in the marked effect that electric light has had, not only upon the architecture of the modern theatre, but upon the manner of the modern actor on the stage, and also on the literary form and content of the drama itself.

In the days when the ancient Greeks flocked to the open-air amphitheatres to witness a performance of "Eodepus Tyrannus," or the "Frogs," the actors were so far away from the audience that only the favored few in the front rows could hear them, and the acting had to be the simplest of pantomime—broad gestures that would "carry" to the farthest rows of spectators.

The absolutely essential interpretations that could not be shown in pantomime were shouted by a great chorus, and the drama had to be written with this manner of presentation in view. The Passion Play of Oberammergau is a survival of that particular school.

Without elaborating upon the various transition stages down to and including the gas-lighted theatre, it may be pointed out that as the modern "picture frame" stage details of dress, make up, and other accessories have to be carried to a pitch of perfection to stand inspection under the revealing electric lights, while the broad gesture and ranting elocution of the earlier theatre has given place to the suggestion of emotion or thought by the lifting of an eyebrow or the twitching of a finger. The intimacy of the modern playhouse makes it unnecessary even for the actors to speak above an ordinary conversational tone.

In other words "acting" today consists in acting as people similarly situated might conceivably behave in real life, and the electric light that makes it possible for the audience to catch the slightest change of expression or more minute movement has made this possible. The modern playwright has adapted his literary form and style, perforce, to the niceties and subtleties, thus made possible, of expression upon the stage.

The statement of the Victrola Company that it had paid \$40,000 the past year to the Caruso estate, and the observation that artistes received a larger income from their contributions to the mechanical production of their talents than to their public renditions show to what an extent the development of electricity has invaded the world of music.

The effect, as can readily be seen, is the same as in other industries, to increase and cheapen production. Whereas the works of a few great artistes can be carried to many more people, less skill on the whole is required and we see inexperienced youth supplanting the artistes who acquired their renown after long years of preparation.

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