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The New Collectivist Propaganda

By GLENN E. HOOVER

DURING THE DEPRESSION, the socialist program was presented to us in the attractive guise of "economic planning" and many converts were made among those who had neither the time nor the stomach for dialectical materialism and would have associated the patronymic "Marx" with the Christian name of Harpo. For a public as functionally illiterate as our own, scientific socialism must be watered down to a few slogans. Planning might have been even more seductive, during those troubled times, if so many Americans had not been able to look out their windows and watch the men at work on the WPA projects. They were chastened by the thought that central, governmental planning, mixed with the American brand of politics, would put some simulacrum of Harry Hopkins at the economic controls, and even at the depth of the depression they were hardly ready for that.

The popular resistance to socialism, when presented to our people in its pure state, under a clear and simple label, has made it necessary for its advocates to resort, more or less unconsciously, to a whole series of linguistic frauds. Timid churchmen who associated Communism with the Antichrist were urged to work for a society in which the "profit motive" would be eliminated. Unionists, presumably less concerned with motives than with power, were urged to demand "economic democracy," perhaps the fuzziest slogan in the history of a rather fuzzy science. And finally the general public was warned that political democracy could be preserved only if "economic power" were distributed among us, presumably in equal doses.

Now that the depression's unemployed, through the alchemy of the defense industries, have become our newly rich,

collectivism must be presented as something more than a cure for unemployment. Hence it is presented in this present period as the prerequisite for winning the war, or as the sole means of avoiding a post-war Fascist régime which our business leaders are plotting to foist upon us. One or more of these theses is elaborated in almost every issue of our "frontier" periodicals. A summary of many of these arguments can be found in an article by Professor Robert S. Lynd which appeared in *The New Republic*, Nov. 9, 1942, under the title, "The Structure of Power." In that article the reader may also observe the peculiar literary style now affected by the collectivist literati, who have developed a jargon as unique as the patois of the pedagogues. It is guaranteed to impress or infuriate, at five hundred paces.

The Nature of Economic Power

THE CONCEPT OF ECONOMIC POWER needs careful analysis. The control of masters over their slaves is perhaps the oldest and most widespread form of economic power. For one man to compel another to work for him is to exercise power in its most naked form, a form so ugly that it is now banned throughout the civilized world. Those who must seek employment from others have been called "wage slaves" by certain humorless socialists, but the modern labor market differs so much from the old slave market that attempts to identify them have proved ludicrous. Among thinking men the term "wage slave" is a Marxian cliché used only in jest.

It is true that, whether slave or free, we must work if we would live honorably, but in this we are subject to an inexorable law of nature and not to the dominion of our fellows. It is also true that those who work for others must do so on terms that are agreeable to their employer as well as to themselves. If in so doing they become the employer's slave, by the same logic the employer, who can secure employees only

by granting their minimum conditions, is equally the slave of his employees. Thus the rhetoric dealing with "wage slavery" contributes absolutely nothing to any serious consideration of economic power.

Collectivists usually argue that economic power in its most virulent form can be seen in the control which industrial corporations exercise over their workers. Since the corporate form of organization is more widely used in the United States than in any other country, and no other country rivals ours in the size of its industrial giants, the logic of their argument would suggest that American corporations exercise their power to reduce the wages of our workers to the lower limits of subsistence. The truth is, of course, that both money wages and real wages in the United States are higher than in any other country. Something is apparently wrong—not with the wages of the American workman, but with the logic of those who argue that rich and powerful corporations make for a depressed and poorly-paid proletariat. The theory just doesn't fit the facts. However, theories not based on facts have a life of their own, completely divorced from reality, and, diligently propagated, live on forever.

Certain business firms undoubtedly try to use their power to eliminate rival concerns. Some of the methods employed to that end have already been outlawed and perhaps there are others which should be proscribed. In any event, the fact that certain business concerns are at war with each other does not fit readily into another collectivist theory, according to which monopoly has been "synchronized" and developed into a "centrally-organized system of power," in the language of Professor Lynd. The average American who builds a house and must listen to a series of salesmen, one of whom wants him to heat with gas, another electricity, another coal, and another oil may properly suspect that the "organized system of power" is a figment of somebody's imagination.

But imagined ogres live much longer than real ones, and for the "centrally organized system of power," we may predict a particularly long life.

The claim that our industrial corporations are exercising increased power over our government will elicit amazement and wrath in all the exclusive clubs. Whatever defects these gentlemen have, they do not practice self-deception. They know perfectly well that never in the history of this country have they had less influence in Washington than since 1932, and they are not too certain that their influence there will increase appreciably in the foreseeable future. They undoubtedly have hopes, but the more clear-headed of them must doubt if their influence at Washington will ever be as great as it was during the administration of General Grant, or McKinley, or the Harding-Coolidge-Hoover era. The American industrialists would gladly swap political power with organized labor, or the veterans, or even the silver producers, and as for the Farm Bloc,—the very thought of its political power must turn them green with envy.

The New Collectivism

SOME MAY DOUBT if the term "collectivist" is applicable to those who hold the views expressed in Professor Lynd's article referred to above. There is, it must be admitted, some difficulty in determining just what their constructive proposals are, because they intuitively avoid such terms as "communism," "socialism" and "collectivism." Their approach is oblique and their language is often vague to the point of obscurity. They would hesitate to urge "public ownership and control of the means of production,"—a phrase in which the socialists for so long have clearly summarized their proposal. Instead they assure us that we "have no choice as to whether economic and state power shall be merged." To me, at least, such a "merger" means socialism or it means nothing,

and by telling us we have no choice in the matter they introduce the Marxian concept of inevitability without frightening their readers by the use of that old gentleman's provocative name. Thus two birds are killed with one circumlocution!

They further identify their program with that of the socialists by joining with them in their acceptance of monopoly. Professor Lynd puts it as follows:

Both bigness and monopoly are normal antecedents to the stage of planned provision for the needs of society which we are now entering, and there is no longer any point in attacking either.

Since he favors monopoly it is not surprising that he approves of trade unions, which are essentially devices with which their members seek to obtain a monopoly price for their labor. As to the organization of labor, he even urges "moving forward to its thorough-going democratic extension,"—whatever that means. He undoubtedly shares the views of the leaders of the A. F. of L., the C. I. O. and the National Association of Manufacturers with respect to the activities of Thurman Arnold. It is quite logical that these monopolists should make common cause when so many of them have felt on their necks the hot breath of the Department of Justice, but to see, working together, the leaders on *both* sides of the "class struggle," has added some comic relief to the current scene.

It is passing strange that those who are so disturbed by the power exercised by our corporations should wish to see their separate powers rolled into one and combined with the traditional powers of the political state. Then indeed would the individual man be confronted with something for which only the Old Testament names of Behemoth or Leviathan seem appropriate. Those who now complain of the inquisitorial practices of government agencies, of employer's black-lists, of the interlocking directorate device for the co-ordination of corporate policy, of the limited choices in "company towns"

may be comforted if told, in the American vernacular, that they "ain't seen nothin' yet." If the heralds of the *New Republic* have their way, the entire United States will be transformed into a "company town," with one centralized power to tax us, ration us, classify us, tell us what we can eat, wear, where we can live, where we shall work, for what hours and for what wages.

And why will such a concentration come about? Professor Lynd gives the answer:

The sheer fact of the emergence of effectively planned nations has, because of the logic of organization inherent in modern technology, outmoded the old system under which all our American national life has been lived.

Most readers will be curious to know the names of the "effectively planned nations" whose "emergence" has outmoded our American national life. That would make possible some definite and realistic comparisons which could bring the argument down from the Olympian heights where all is wrapped in verbal mist and *New Republic* rhetoric. Having been reared in the spirit of Christian charity, I can wish the prophets of their New Order no greater mishap than to be forced to explain to some husky truck-driver just how "the logic of organization inherent in modern technology" has "outmoded" the life to which he has been accustomed.

Perhaps the Soviet Union is not considered one of the "effectively planned" nations, but it is certainly the one in which planning is most complete, the one in which political power and economic power have been most completely merged. The outside world has built up considerable information with respect to the rôle of power in that sorely tried country, and much of it is not pleasant to read. The effect which the merging of all kinds of power has on the national psychology was neatly summed up by Eugene Lyons, who observed the process long and closely. He said:

Where there is only one employer, namely, the state, meekness is the first law of economic survival.

To this it may be added, that if the merging of power here followed somewhat the same course as in Russia, critical periodicals of the *New Republic* type would be the first to disappear.

Democratic Controls Under Socialism

TO THIS IT WILL BE SAID that we should merge all powers and yet retain our democratic rights. The advocates of the consolidation of power realize that consolidation may as well lead to Fascism and slavery as to the Promised Land. Nor are all of them too keen about the position of the individual man in the Soviet Union, although the Soviet's gallant resistance to the Hitlerite invasion has made it rather bad form to discuss the status of power and freedom in the U.S.S.R. Our advocates of collectivism spend too little time in showing the results of their program in other lands. They prefer to picture the happy results that might be obtained from the merging of power here, where, presumably, it would be placed in the unwilling hands of wise, kindly and unambitious men.

This, of course, is mere Utopia-mongering and shows a reluctance to face the facts of American political life. By pursuing this course our advocates of collectivism can spend half their time damning those who hold political power and the other half urging that economic power should be transferred to the state. Of course, they do not want it put into the hands of the present elected officials, but into the pure and reluctant hands of those political White Knights who are kept, conveniently, off-stage, and will appear only when the State takes over our basic industries and thus solves the "internal contradictions" of our society. The sad fact is that these White Knights have the same kind of reality as Santa Claus. The myth of their existence enables the advocates of collectivism to prolong their play forever. If this myth were dispelled, the curtain would be rung down.

We are told that we need not fear the concentration of political and economic power, provided "democratic controls" are established and maintained. But what are these controls and how would they operate? For example, let us assume that our government ends its "conflict" with the United States Steel Corporation, by taking over the properties of the latter. Some of the staff then propose the erection of a new plant in the Northwest, a project which others believe would be ill-advised. We are entitled to know how that question could be settled "democratically."

We doubt if even the most uncompromising advocate of "industrial democracy" would wish such decisions to be made by a vote of the government employees engaged in producing iron and steel. Most American workers have too great a sense of humor to permit them to believe that they are qualified to make such decisions. They may want to participate in decisions on hours, wages and certain working conditions, but they have never shown any desire to usurp the functions of the "boss." Nor is there anyone, I suppose, outside of an institution, who would like to see such decisions made by the Congress or any of the committees thereof.

We are left, then, with the sole alternative of decisions made by some governmental executive, responsible either directly or indirectly to the President. The popular will, or the will of the workers will control him only so far as they can be expressed at the polls. But the outcome of federal elections is the result of so many factors, and so many issues are involved, that even after the votes are counted, the "will" of the people on any particular issue is still a matter of conjecture. An immeasurable and inconclusive influence on the outcome of federal elections is all that is possible by way of democratic control of entrepreneurial decisions. On analysis, the proposal to merge economic and political power offers nothing to the common man which evokes his enthusiasm, and the

frontier thinkers must continue to bemoan his "lethargy" and "ideological confusion."

Walter Lippmann and other scholars have frequently reminded us that the very nature of the decisions which must be made, both by governments and by business, put them beyond the democratic process. A democratic society is not one in which the people rule, but rather one in which the people select their rulers. If this were well understood, with all its implications, there would be less talk of "economic democracy," and less confidence in the democratic checks which allegedly could be tacked on to a monolithic State. Inasmuch as the frontier thinkers agree that, in the absence of these checks, the merging of powers would but result in Fascism, we should insist that they show us what the "democratic" checks are, and just how they would function.

The Changing Nature Under Politics

PROFESSOR LYND IS OF THOSE who contend that "politics is but the science of 'who gets what, when, and how.'" Controversies which have been traditionally described as political, are, according to the new enlightenment, merely struggles for an increased share of economic goods and services. The advocates of this theory could provide the American public with considerable amusement if they would use the theory to explain our recent disagreements over such questions as isolation, prohibition, woman's suffrage, or the legalization of birth-control in Massachusetts. But they will probably leave this task to the less respectable and more fanatical Marxians, whose lack of a sense of humor often makes them very funny.

This new theory of politics, however, must not be dismissed lightly because it is pressed to ridiculous extremes. It will explain an increasingly large percentage of our political controversies, but it will do so because we have already adopted, quite unconsciously, a new theory of the rôle of the State.

The State is no longer the "policeman" who protects life and property, resists invasion, administers justice, promotes public health and provides schools and highways. The State has shed its policeman's uniform and has become a Santa Claus, dispensing largess, in the form of cash, services or power, to farmers, workers, veterans, and tariff beneficiaries.

The State, which came into existence to perform certain limited but generally accepted functions, which stood as a symbol of the unity of its citizens, is becoming an instrument for the redistribution of wealth and income. No method could be better devised for destroying the cement which holds our society together and making of our people a congeries of pressure groups engaged in mutual recrimination and conflict. To me it is not a pleasing picture, but some may enjoy the resultant struggles which will develop at the polls and perhaps culminate at the barricades.

Collectivist Propaganda and the War

IF THE LEFTIST LITERATI under discussion spoke or wrote with the clearness and simplicity of which the English language is capable, they might reach enough people to hamper the war effort. So far as war aims are concerned, we are warned that we "are rendered gullible by our traditions," that "the management of the present war has been taken over by representatives of big business," and that meanwhile, "the lawyers . . ., the public-relations men, the press and all the other pliant agents of organized business go busily about on cat feet as they spread the net and tighten the noose . . . etc." There are probably few readers of *The New Republic* on Guadalcanal, but if there were, such reports might take their minds from their present troubles.

The frontier thinkers are not lacking in assurance. Regarding the essential shape of things to come, they seldom argue with us but are content to draw the veil and let us see

our future, which to them is easily predictable, presumably because it is largely beyond control. Here is an example:

We shall emerge from this war well on our way to having a permanently planned and managed economy; and if business controls the goals of that planning, that will mean management also of all relevant social and cultural life.

The conclusion is, gentle reader, do not resist a "permanently planned and managed economy" for that is to come, like the stars in their courses, and we have but to accept it with what grace we can muster. Our only choice is to have that economy controlled by "business" or the "people," presumably, alas, the same "people" who refuse, in such large numbers, to read *The New Republic* and read instead some astrological reviews. As one who has always preferred *The New Republic*, I must admit that perhaps as clear and certain a picture of the future may be obtained from one as the other. On this point humility must be the order of the day.