

# "Dangerous Thoughts" - Without Dynamite

By FRANCIS NEILSON

On the jacket of *Dangerous Thoughts* the publisher informs us that the author, Lancelot Hogben, possesses "as lucid and powerful an intelligence as exists in Europe." This is not a bad beginning by way of introduction, for I must confess I have not read *Mathematics for the Millions* or any of his other books; indeed, *Dangerous Thoughts* is the first link in my acquaintance with the author.

In the first essay, called "The Creed of a Scientific Humanist," he assures us that it is this creed which he professes, and that this profession is the one he tries to practise.

He tells us that the anticipations of Socialism before and immediately after the Great War did not materialize. "From the moment when all hope of return to pre-War conditions was officially abandoned by conservative politicians the official Socialist parties entered an eclipse which has lasted ever since." Further on he says, "While *laissez-faire* was in the ascendant Socialism meant having some plan in contradistinction to none."

It is curious how this notion persists—that England or any other country ever enjoyed a system of *laissez-faire*. If scientists would only take the trouble, when they wish to indulge in such fancies, to read works published in recent years on the Physiocrats, they would save themselves the humiliation of flagrantly breaking the rules laid down in their own classrooms. For such an error in natural history or mathematics, Hogben would plough or flunk a student.

Let us, however, become acquainted with the creed Hogben practises. He says:

"The social control of scientific humanism is the recognition that the sufficient basis for rational cooperation between citizens is scientific investigation of the common needs of mankind, a scientific inventory of resources available for satisfying them, and a realistic survey of how modern social in-

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Professor Lancelot Hogben, whose latest book is analyzed in the accompanying critique, is a distinguished mathematician, perhaps best known to the general public as the author of "Mathematics for the Million." But he has also gained a widespread reputation as a new type of reformer, one who depends on the rationality and efficiency of science for solution of social and economic problems.

Francis Neilson, author of this critique, was a member of the British Parliament during the first World War, and is author of "Man at the Crossroads" and other volumes on social and economic subjects. He will be the principal speaker at the Commencement Exercises of the Henry George School of Social Science to be held in New York on June 3.

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stitutions contribute to or militate against the use of such resources for the satisfaction of fundamental human needs."

With little alteration this would do for a statement of the first intentions of the New Deal, which we have had for eight years in this country and, up to now, to use the phrase of the man-in-the-street, "nothin' doing." Eleven millions unemployed and the national debt raised from nineteen billions to over forty billions! In this country scientific humanism which in its operations has had the benefit of Brain Trusts, Best Minds and specially drilled, college-reared advocates of change, has proceeded from failure to failure with a regularity that even the yes-men in Congress are beginning to notice. Of course, scientific humanism as it is to be practised by Mr. Hogben is proof against failure. He does not realize that Germany is today suffering from scientific humanism inflicted with an iron hand, forged in the furnace of hate. I hope he will not think I am pro-German when I say that I do not know how the scientific humanists of England could do better than the same cult working in Germany.

If Mr. Hogben really believes that the exercise of scientific humanism is all that is necessary for bringing peace and plenty to the people, I feel

sure that the rest of his life will be charged with humiliation and disappointment. Something more is required, and how any scientist living in England can fail to see that it is the lack of *laissez-faire* which is the cause of present conditions, is something which I cannot understand.

He asks for a fairer distribution of the produce. Does he know what occasions the unequal distribution of wealth? I doubt it, for he gives one the impression that the study of economics is quite unnecessary for the scientific humanist. Science alone if practised according to Hogben, would be quite sufficient to solve the inequalities which exist. A knowledge of fundamental economics—say, for instance, the three primary factors in production—belongs to the "dismal" science. He fails to see that no matter what changes are made by Science and its gadgets, the old factors are still present and govern in the production of wealth and its distribution.

Scientific humanists should know they cannot by Science increase the girth of the earth, the place on which men seek a living. The earth is large enough and there are men enough to exploit its resources, but millions go hungry. Why? Two of many reasons may be given: (1) most men cannot use it freely because it is owned by private individuals; (2) State aid, private philanthropy and sentimental politicians have destroyed initiative in men and the desire to fend for themselves. The conspiracy against the poor goes on steadily, notwithstanding the advance of Science and no matter whether the Tories, the Liberals or the Laborites sit on the front bench, and no matter how many scientists are humanized nor how many schemes of "amelioration" are launched to keep the impoverished quiet. It is now bread and circus for the needy and the loafers, rent and leisure for the land monopolists.

When he turns to the difficulties of scientific progress after the Reformation, Hogben reveals a loose-

ness of statement that would not be tolerated in his students. "It is obvious that organized Christianity was an impediment to scientific inquiry in the Italy of Galileo, in the France of Descartes, in the Germany of Haeckel, and in the England of Darwin." Such a statement requires not only modification but expiation. The Galileo myth was dealt with long ago, even by Huxley, and there is no excuse for a "lucid and powerful intelligence" overlooking the fact. Moreover, organized science was not a bad second in thwarting scientific inquiry. Take the case of Darwin and Samuel Butler after *Life and Habit* was published. A long list of great scientists who suffered at the hands of organized science could easily be drawn up, but such an exercise has not powerfully attracted such men as Mr. Hogben and Lord Russell. At any rate, before the Reformation, whatever science we had sprang from the Church, and today the Jesuits themselves have proved that Science does not conflict with religion.

Nowhere in the work does our professor think it worth while to define the word wealth. Therefore, it is impossible for the reader to know what he is driving at. As this word has so much to do with the Age of Plenty he seeks, it seems absolutely necessary that a scientific humanist, before he launches his scheme, should know the substances with which he is dealing. In the laboratories at Aberdeen, presumably the students are clearly informed by the chemists of the nature of the elements used in experiments. A bio-chemist would be shocked to find a student proceeding with an experiment if he did not know what sodium was or what might happen when it came in contact with water. Can there be any excuse for a scientific humanist despising economics and neglecting to know the precise meaning of the term wealth?

Again, we receive a setback when we are told "the necessary desideratum is to define human needs consistently with the Darwinian doctrine." Which doctrine of Darwin's does Professor Hogben refer to? A course in Samuel Butler is surely necessary for the scientist who is under the impres-

sion that there is only one Darwinian doctrine. As we proceed through this highly entertaining series of essays, the fog becomes thicker and thicker. It is amusing to see it gather around the scientific humanist as he flounders about in (for him) uncharted domains. He tells us:

"The word plenty defined with reference to man's species needs has therefore a perfectly clear social meaning which remains in spite of the continued existence of Austrian economists. Plenty is the excess of free energy over the collective calorie debt of human effort applied to securing the needs which all human beings share."

It never occurred to me that the plenty which I enjoy could be defined in this manner. It reminds me of the calorie rage at the depth of the depression, when a nurse in a hospital said to a wife visiting a sick man: "Have you had your calories today?" Her reply was, "No, I hate the things. I had a good square meal instead."

One of the essays starts with a question:

"People have stopped asking, Can capitalism survive? No intelligent individual under forty-five years of age imagines that it can. What is less certain is an answer to the question, Can the human race survive?"

"Can capitalism survive?" In some strange way it has survived since Marx and Engels began their work, and no matter what those under forty-five have to say about its future length of tenure, I do not mind prophesying that there will be scientific humanists a hundred years from now who will be asking the same stupid question. The reason these questions are asked is that the curious have never taken the trouble to inform themselves as to what capitalism is. Capitalism began, I presume, with the first tool that was made, being that part of wealth that aids in the production of more wealth. Recently in Anatolia, Professor Garstang and Dr. Burkitt uncovered tools of the sixth millennium B. C., and men have been lending tools to other men on the payment of interest for use and wear and tear ever since that time. And so long as tools can lighten labor, men will continue to

carry on the system. Lenin learned a lot when he had to put into practice what had been tabulated on a blueprint. And so will Professor Hogben, when he begins. As for the human race, it will get over its present setback. It wriggled through the Black Death and the Great War; it witnessed the exploits of Caesar ("dead and turned to clay"); it survived the Reformation and the Thirty Years War; it saw the rise of Bonaparte, endured the butchery which took place from Moscow to Corunna, and it is now, with fortitude and unseemly tolerance, enduring the inflictions of the New Deal. And what is more, the human race, in spite of contraceptives, will rear children, send them to the wars and bury them in foreign lands. It will go on because this business is conducted by men whom scientific humanists have never taken the trouble to study. Anthropology is a science; medicine is a science; chemistry is a science; but the man dealt with by these branches of learning is not the man the politicians use. The man who carries on from age to age is the world enigma, the container of all the good and all the evil; the gentleman who confounds the philosopher is no specimen for an experiment in a laboratory conducted by scientists.

There is so much in these essays that might have been written by members of the Brain Trust that I sometimes think that Professor Hogben has taken an overdose of Tugwell, Soule and Chase. He makes the same glaring errors. Here is a sentence that might have been written by any one of these men:

"In view of the rising popularity of Fascist doctrines, it is important to emphasize that the distribution of purchasing power to increase the volume of effective demand is essentially different from the view held by the pioneers of Socialism fifty or a hundred years ago, and it would have been regarded by them as a capitulation to the prevailing doctrine of *laissez-faire*, against which they revolted."

Does Professor Hogben wish to convey the idea that Socialists at any time revolted against a system which did not exist?

Then he goes on to say:

"If Socialism accepts the distribution of purchasing power as its primary and sole concern, its success will merely aggravate the tendencies which have made capitalism a biological failure."

I commend this extraordinary sentence to the Privy Council of the White House. Corcoran and Cohen, might take to heart this extraordinary prophecy, for they are at present considering a larger distribution, according to some, as a means of consolidating the vote next November.

What on earth has capitalism to do with biological success or failure? Perhaps we may uncover the mystery in the following sentence: "The Marxist case against capitalism is that capitalism makes for increasing poverty." Now we know where to place the blame for biological failure. According to Hogben we must infer that poverty and its attendant ills are inflicted by the system which Socialists call capitalism. Surely this means that capitalism, desiring the production of more wealth so that more capital may be used, of set purpose determines that the people shall be impoverished and defeat the end for which capitalism is organized. It really means that capitalism is a system devised by men who persist in cutting off their noses to spite

their faces. I venture to state that there never was a capitalist who did not desire whole-heartedly customers with plenty of money to spend. Our professor will have to look further and much deeper if he really wants to know why poverty keeps march with progress.

Nor could superficial rhetoric go further than this: "As I see it, capitalism is no longer a creative force." I defy any reasonable creature to say in precise terms what this sentence means. Why creative? Does Professor Hogben mean a productive force? What could capitalism create? It does not create land; it does not paint pictures, chisel statues, compose symphonies or write poems. These are not the jobs capitalists undertake. Moreover, capitalism is not an organization, no matter what may be said of combines and cartels. The comprehensive term is supposed to cover the activities of all capitalists no matter where they are. Sometimes he refers to capitalism as if it were an eleemosynary institution; again, as an educational establishment, or a Toynbee Hall or Cooper Institute. Very often in spite of his objection to organized Christianity before or after the Reformation, he gives one the impression that capitalism ought to be a Christian Endeavor association. But he seldom stops to explain; off he goes at a tangent, car-

ried away by his exhilarating verbosity, and the result is that we get nothing but outright assertion—sheer statement—and, when all is said and done, there is scarcely anything touching economic, industrial and social conditions that hasn't been said over and over again since the Communist Manifesto was published. However, Professor Hogben says it all with an exuberance that is highly entertaining, for he is a great mathematician and Regius Professor of Natural History at the University of Aberdeen! Still, it is as true of Hogben as it is of ninety-five percent of our professors in schools of economics in our universities, that they should, when the weary day is over and the teaching task is done, repair to a night school where they may learn how to define simple economic terms and learn something of the fundamentals of production.

Professor Hogben is passing through the phase all Socialists must suffer at some time. We have seen in Lenin and Trotsky, in Kautsky and numbers of others since the World War a desire to re-fashion the worn-out props they have used. It amounts to this: if we must abandon the old shibboleth, let us find a new name for it and retain all its unquestionable features dressed in the height of fashion. No one will recognize the old strumpet in a new garb!