The War and Its Aftermath

SOCIAL changes are not planned. It is impossible to channel men's desires or to blueprint their mode of living. Given a certain economic and political environment, we can foretell the tendency of social movements; the details or even the general outlines are in the field of speculation, perhaps clairvoyance.

For example, a Hitlerized Europe could hardly have been predicted a year before he became Chancellor, although we might have seen in the post-war degradation of the German nation a force leading to some sort of dictatorship.

Again, the most sanguine socialist in America could not have forecast, say in 1928, that their program of social legislation would be championed within a few years by an aristocratic landowner; and not even Roosevelt knew in 1933 that he would be president of a nation demanding government largesse.

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Social changes come about gradually, imperceptibly. "Things happen," and people find adjustment in the new conditions. The new conditions may be unsatisfactory, and more changes become necessary. The cumulative effect of these changes brings about what seems to be a sudden re-orientation of our way of living and thinking.

As with a disease which had its origin in some distant accident, perhaps pre-natal, the present outward symptom is the only sudden thing about it. A depression, which announces itself with a stock market crash, is really a process which began when somebody somewhere found himself unemployable, communicated his condition to other workers who in turn ceased to be producers—until the number of idle workers and the consequent misery burst upon our attention.

When we become aware of the symptoms of a new social order we begin to ask how it came about. But the causes are so complicated, so remote, so hidden in unrecorded incidents that we run to plausibility for an easy answer. Usually, like primitive people who personalized the enigmas of life in gods, we ascribe causation to historical characters.

But the Civil War was not caused by Lincoln, the depression which first attracted attention in 1929 was born long before Hoover, the present world trend toward collectivization cannot be laid at the door of Lenin. The names we associate with social movements as causes actually attach themselves only to results.

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Right now we are gazing into the crystal ball of the future. We find in it names: Hitler, Roosevelt, Churchill. Yet what these persons do or do not do is not of their own planning. They find themselves in a milieu which was prepared for them by economic, social and political developments that originated, perhaps, years before they were born. And the kind of life that will prevail decades hence is in part the result of what is happening now. The social process is continuous.

Do we know, for instance, whether we shall have even the political form of democracy in this country? In England the present ministers have agreed that there shall be no election until three years after the War. This may mean that the present government, with slight changes, will have had a span of life covering more than a decade.

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If we are engaged in the war in 1944 shall we bother to hold an election? If we find a satisfactory way of living without elections, will it not be easy to convince ourselves that all the fuss about democracy is hardly worth while?

In financial publications we read between the lines that industrial leaders are adjusting themselves to the idea of a regulated economy. They are not opposed to the New Deal. They have found a way of living within its framework, and any criticism of it is directed at its management, not at its philosophy. Does this attitude portend collectivism by and for monopolists? Fascism?

After the war there may be an attempt to pick up where we left off. But the huge national debt, the hardships attending the change to a peace economy, the lack of jobs, the disillusionment of a maimed nation may bring about a social upheaval. Will there be a revolution? Communism?

Too many varying forces are at work shaping our future. We cannot predict what direction American civilization will take. All we can say with certainty is this:

It will shape itself by the way men—little men—find an adjustment. If they find the making of a living easy, and the pursuit of happiness not impossible, it will be that kind of civilization.