

OUR PHILOSOPHY OF DESPAIR

The fact is that we have both prosperity and poverty, both surplus and deficit; and we are not able to choose between them. We have classes who live in no fear of want, who are assured that a good livelihood will result from their economic efforts, who live secure from the wolf that waits by the doors of the poor; but these poor, as Christ saw so long ago, we have with us still. They live in constant fear that, in spite of their best efforts, somehow calamity will descend upon them. A period of mysterious business depression that closes mills and factories, the introduction of some new machine or process, a change in the wants of people, old age, accident—all have a frightful power over their lives and the lives of those for whom they feel a responsibility.

So much, the most casual observation makes plain. There is a constant shifting of the proportions of those who live in each of these sharply contrasted conditions. At one time many, at another time fewer, live in the free air of prosperity. There are many even of the prosperous who have known poverty; and those who have felt the ghostly touch of its fear never really forget the shudder that then shook them. They are quite incapable of freedom. They look at existence through eyes that are darkened by that single old experience: it seems to them simply that life is a double struggle—man against nature, and man against man. All their attitudes and all their reflections are dominated by this conception of a hunger that lies in wait. It becomes an enemy of popular prophecy, of social expectation. The fact that we live in an age of economic surplus when prosperity—not for a few, not for any group or any class, but for all—hovers imminently on the edge of our civilization, is quite hidden. We have eyes but we cannot see, being withheld from vision by the old fog of poverty philosophy that hangs over our world.

The National Bureau of Economic Research established our national income at some sixty-six or sixty-seven billions¹ and Mr. Friday said boldly in 1923, "We are within striking distance of an economic order where the means of well being shall be established for all."² This statement he has reiterated many times, without contradiction. And these are no new generalizations. Simon N. Patten knew all this to its furthest implications and preached his philosophy of prosperity for forty years.³ But there were none to listen, and our heritage of dismal thought that "grew up beside the meager turnip fields of England" continued its influence unabated.

One wonders why men are so afraid of good fortune, of favorable facts—for they are facts. One would suppose that such news for humanity would be seized upon and carried in the streets on joyful banners; and that the intelligence of humanity would see at once that its first business is the organization of ways of utilizing surplus for happiness. After all it is a simple business to do what has to be done first in the economic world to make people happy, but nothing of the sort has happened when again and again attention has been called to our potentialities of prosperity. Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, even Henry George, enjoy a greater vogue in America—the America of three and a half billion bushel corn crops—than does Simon Patten who, unlike those others, came straight out of the fecund mid-century soil of Illinois.

We are like a chosen people on a dividing ridge between the desert, through which we have just come with pain and struggle, and the promised land, in the hope of which we have been sustained in the terrible journey. We stand facing the desert, thinking desert thoughts, forming desert words, when all the time at our backs, in plain sight and even seen occasionally over our shoulders, there lies the land of milk and honey. We progress backward, crab-fashion, down the easy slope, mumbling about sand and dryness, the need of provision for desert life, the dangers

¹ Estimate for 1919. We must have added many billions since then.

² *The New Republic*, xxxiii, 273. Cf. also his *Profits, Wages and Prices* Ch. XIV, "How Can Real Wages Be Raised?"

³ See, for instance, his *Theory of Prosperity*, his *New Basis of Civilization*, and his "Reconstruction of Economic Theory" in *Essays in Economic Theory*, 1924.

of travel, and the sins and sorrows of a homeless folk, when we might be facing the other way, when we might run like children, shouting joyfully down into grassy, well-watered valleys, privations forgotten, hearts full of an opulent tomorrow.

It is no accident but the same old incorrigible despair, that causes our prophets, our artists, our thinkers either to turn their eyes backward to the medieval side of European life, relics of which still exist, or to select the worst in American life as typical of the whole. This passes readily under the convenient name of realism, whereas in fact, it represents only a distorted verisimilitude of our life. We expect the Socialists who have their theoretical roots in nineteenth century Europe to present misery as the typical aspect of twentieth century America. We are not surprised when we find that economics has not entirely recovered from the gray gloom of English fogs; but we may be pardoned a wonder when America herself breeds a generation of novelists and poets who have entirely overlooked the promises of a rich future beneath the surface uglinesses of our industrialism. In some sense it is selective. We want the thing we get from Sinclair Lewis; and so a host of other Lewises spring up. Lewis did not start a tradition—he merely confirmed it—but it is not the American tradition as we shall some day find!

There is this much to be said for the Lewis school: they state the matter clearly and without confusion. They are all against what they are able to find in America. Not all of our thinkers are so clear. They know the promise but they are not willing to give themselves up to it and they waver between the notion of surplus and the notion of deficit. There is an excellent illustration of this in Scott Nearing's book *The Next Step*. He opens with these sentences:

The knell of a dying order is tolling. Its keynote is despair. Gaunt hunger pulls at the rope, while dazed humanity listens, bewildered and afraid . . . The war showed the impotence of the present order. . . . Yet the failure of the revolutionary forces to avail themselves of the opportunity presented by the war proved the unreadiness of the masses to throw off the yoke of the old regime and to lay the foundations of the new order.

Notice that the key-note of Scott Nearing is also despair and that the foundations of the new order are not yet laid; yet if one

reads on, he discovers that Scott Nearing knows perfectly well that this isn't so. He presents a rational, and as it seems to me, particularly well-ordered plan of march upon the promised land. Economic federalism seems to him to be the method of organizing the forces of progress that will lead us there. He says all that forcibly and persuasively, and comes (p. 163) to this really astonishing paragraph to a reader who has attended his opening words:

In the past only the favored few had a chance to express their most holy aspirations. The development of modern industry, with its facility in the production of livelihood, promises a time, and that at no very great distance, when this opportunity may be common property, and men everywhere may be able to participate in that unending search after love, beauty, justice, truth—the highest of which humanity is capable.

There is a deep confusion here, the same confusion that torments so many thinkers of any and all complexions. It is most serious, of course, when it is found in social science. Nowhere is it so prevalent as in social theory, for economics has its background in the English classicists, sociology in Spencer, and politics in Locke and Montesquieu. It will not be resolved until we definitely turn our backs on the desert philosophers and gain a clearer view of the promised land, that green and fruitful place. Meanwhile we lack the vision or the resolution to choose from the elements of life the enduring ones, the ones that shall among them shape the future.

There can be no doubt that we live in a time when there is misery and suffering, but it is unnecessary to assume because of this that misery and suffering are the significant features of the future. Indeed it is difficult to think otherwise than that much of the condition that we deplore continues to exist because we will not to enter into the kingdom. A nation that, in a single year, can add upwards of ten billions to its capital surplus and that chooses to ignore this fact in favor of gaunt hunger pulling at the rope of a funereal bell that tolls a knell of death, is in a pathological state, no less. Our social strength grows immeasurably, our evolution prepares the new order; how long shall we permit this disease complex to keep the forces of liberation supine and valueless?

REXFORD GUY TUGWELL

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY