

SOCIAL DECAY AND REGENERATION

To

MRS. BERNARD BISHOP

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED IN GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT
OF THE KINDLY AND HELPFUL INTEREST THAT
SHE HAS TAKEN IN ITS MAKING

SOCIAL DECAY AND REGENERATION

BY

R. AUSTIN FREEMAN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
HAVELOCK ELLIS

*"Ill fares the land, to hast'ning ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay."*

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INTRODUCTION

SOME fifteen years ago a brilliant young American, Gerald Stanley Lee, wrote as a sort of "Introduction to the Twentieth Century" a book called "The Voice of the Machines." It was one long pæan of joy, infused with much genuine poetic feeling. Man is a machine and the creator of machines. He is turning all life into machinery; modern religion is a machine; education is a machine; government is a machine; trade is a machine; society, literature, journalism, art—all are machines. There is nothing in our modern world that we can do or have or hope to have which is not bound up with machinery. It is in machinery that we must seek for poetry and for beauty and for the Infinite. Those persons who still fail to see this are blind, even already dead; they do not belong to our time.

Mr. Lee's book is still worth reading. It contained a genuine element of truth which had too often been overlooked. Yet it was not the whole truth, and where true it was not impossible to view the matter from an altogether different angle. Ever since the Industrial Revolution began, more than a century ago, there has been an obscure and smouldering resentment against the mechanization of work and life. Among the workers, indeed, whose sound instincts may have felt more than they were able to express, the introduction of machinery, we know, led at first to open revolt and disorder. But

the economists assure us that at that time industry was afflicted by decay and disease, and it was precisely the introduction of machinery which cured the disease; so those pessimistic persons who were inclined to think that, at the same time, it had killed the patient have mostly kept the opinion to themselves. In their wildest denunciations they have remained mild and apologetic, almost eager to give away half their case. Ruskin, who in the last century figured as the chief antagonist of machinery, was in reality scarcely an antagonist at all. He entered, indeed, a notable general protest against the mechanization of work and of life, but when he approached details he was chiefly concerned to express his personal objection to certain by-products of the age of machinery which offended his own æsthetic feelings; he was not opposed to machinery and was even ambitious of inventing machines himself. William Morris, again, simply wished to return in practice to the old pre-machine stage of craftsmanship which he idealized in his Utopian "News from Nowhere"; he made, and as an artist it was not his concern to make, no analytic study of the tendencies of the machine age or attempt to show the way out of it, for Marxism was clearly not the way out. The political economists, as we might expect, have been simply content to investigate things as they are, and not to criticize them; even those who possess a broad, judicial, and humane view of economics, like Professor Marshall, are tender to machinery; and Mr. J. A. Hobson, who goes far in the subordination of economics to social civilization, and realizes something of the inadequacy of machine production, is mild and qualified in his condemnations and has much to say on the other side. They all feel that the Machine Age is too sacrosanct to permit of anything but the mildest criticism of its tendencies, in a whisper, which they seem to hope no one will overhear, and even when they seem

about to open their mouths to roar, it is, after all, "as gently as any sucking dove." For they have never ventured to face the actual facts, and it is even doubtful whether they have always been able to perceive them.

Some twenty years ago I chanced to come across a volume of "Travels and Life in Ashanti and Jaman," presenting a fresh and vivid picture of a strong and primitive people just then being "civilized" off the earth. The author was evidently a man of penetrating observation, of independent judgment, capable of outspoken criticism when it was required, so that his name and his book remained in my memory. There-with he passed out of my ken. But in the meanwhile, as I learn, and as indeed one might expect in a writer of so vigorous a mind, he has been active in another field, and now, with the present volume, he has again by chance come into my line of vision. It is incomparably a more mature book than the "Travels." I realize how profitably the author must have spent the intervening years. On every page one feels that he has acquired a singularly wide, varied, and precise acquaintance with the phenomena of our social life; at the same time he shows a keen power in analyzing these phenomena as well as in demonstrating their wider bearings on the fate of mankind. Moreover, unlike the professional political economists, he gives the impression of having learnt to approach his task, not in the study, but by a large contact with human life and affairs and by a sensitive intellectual receptivity to that contact. That is why I gladly avail myself of the opportunity to help to make this book known to those whom it may concern.

There are few whom it can be said not to concern. To-day, indeed, when, as never perhaps before, there is so much searching of heart concerning the foundation on

which we have based our civilization and so bitter a sense of disillusionment concerning the results so far attained, there may be many to heed the truths so clearly and so uncompromisingly set forth in this book. We are here shown what a Machine Age actually means, and what it must inevitably mean; how the machine which was meant to be the slave of man, its master, becomes itself the master and man its slave; how the effects of machinery on human welfare always tend to be illusory, for the "labour-saving" device increases labour, and the "time-saving" device destroys leisure; how the whole process is necessarily accompanied by a general and increasing degradation, not only in the products of machinery, but in the men and in the society which is responsible for them.

The prospect is not, therefore, hopeless. Dr. Flinders Petrie, in his notable and suggestive little book, "Revolutions in Civilization," points out the remarkable uniformity shown by the civilizations of the past in their progress from growth to decay, the final stage being marked by loss of artistic power and the general uprising of a restless democracy. We seem to see both these tendencies in our own civilization (although the author of the present book, in agreement with Robert Michels in his remarkable and too seldom read study of "Political Parties," finds the modern democratic tendency towards oligarchy), and we see them operating through the development of machinery and the general mechanization of life. Yet, however surely we may know that no civilization endures for ever, the fount of hope springs, and rightly springs, eternal in the human breast. The author of this book, at all events, believes that there is a way to prolong, or even to renew, the life of our civilization. Not everyone will accept his remedy as practicable, just as not everyone will agree at every point with his diagnosis. To some it may seem that,

while we may approve his exposition of the aptitude of every social class, not excluding that of state-controllers, to act in antagonism to society, he yet scarcely makes clear enough the fact that the labouring class, while sometimes the victimizers, have beyond any class been in the past the victims of the Machine Age, and that Labour is now becoming recognized as a supremely important factor of Society. Some of us, also, may consider that Collectivism has claims under modern conditions to play in the social order a valuable part not incongruous with Individualism, and indeed as its indispensable ally, and that these claims are not discredited by setting forth the extravagancies of a wild Collectivism unbridled by Individualism. The fact, however, that the author's standpoint is evidently not that of the extremists on the Labour side obviously adds more point and force to his analysis of our social system, in which he has much in common with the latest social theorists in their revolt against the domination of the State and the spread of bureaucracy. To some readers, no doubt, it will seem that the author's plan of social regeneration is too Utopian in character. One would like to know his attitude towards the schemes of the Guild Socialists, with which his own scheme seems often to have points of contact, being like theirs an attempt to correct the faults of the present industrial system by introducing a maximum amount of individual freedom, responsibility, self-government, and the disappearance of State control, while at the same time he understands—as the Guild Socialists have often failed to understand—that the eugenic problem has now become the most fundamental of social problems.

Criticisms, however, so far as they merely qualify the arguments here set forth are but the legitimate outcome of our own special idiosyncracies, or the author's, and so far as they are merely negative they are futile.

It is more to the point to consider what we ourselves propose to do about the matter. Whatever we propose to do about it, here, certainly, is a book which will help us to realize along what road our civilization is at present moving.

HAVELOCK ELLIS.

PREFACE

THE present book is the product of many years of reflection on the changing conditions of our society and on the probable course of social evolution in the near future. If it had been written a dozen years ago, it would have presented the social conditions of to-day as appertaining to a period nearly a generation later. But the cataclysm of war has precipitated social changes, just as, in the individual, a severe illness may precipitate old age. The sudden transformation of our Industrial Democracy into a Militant Autocracy of the Collectivist type interrupted the continuity of social evolution and violently accelerated the changes in the modes and agencies of social co-ordination.

Nevertheless these changes are but a stage in a train of causation which extends far into the past. And as the mariner, by pricking off on the chart the completed portion of his voyage, is enabled to forecast the direction of the remainder; so, by an investigation of the genesis of present-day conditions, may we hope to forecast the general direction of social change in the near future. And should that forecast indicate change in an unfavourable direction, we may consider how far the change may be subject to our control.

Such is the purpose of the present work; which accordingly falls into two parts: an Analytical part, in which the more important social phenomena are examined as to their nature and causation; and a Synthetic part, in which an endeavour is made to apply to the furtherance of human welfare the inductions made in the first part.

As originally written, the second part contained a synthetic scheme, presented in very full and minute detail. But as this appeared somewhat out of character with the rest

of the book, and as the detail, in what was, after all, but a tentative suggestion, served no useful purpose, it was withdrawn (for subsequent publication if this should seem desirable) and the chapter rewritten so as to present the scheme in a simplified and generalized form. And this, I think, will commend itself even to the most sympathetic reader; who will agree to the desirability of completely establishing the principles before proceeding to consider the details of their application.

R. A. F.

GRAVESEND,
November, 1920.

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