

The American MERCURY

THE DECLINE OF OUR PROLETARIAT

BY L. M. HUSSEY

BACK in the days of the glorious Harding Administration, the Messrs. Harry M. Daugherty and William J. Burns were wont to entertain lovers of official lawlessness with furious Red raids, spectacular suppressions, and wholesale deportations; but shortly thereafter Americans forgot about Russia—or, if they mentioned the land at all, merely opined that the Russians were still starving, and that they would doubtless slit the throats of the brutal commissars at any moment. Even during the first years of the depression, this popular apathy to Moscow continued. With the coming of the New Deal, however, there was a sudden transition to widespread interest. The Brain Trust had scarcely disbursed a preliminary billion dollars when talk of the proletariat—a word hitherto almost meaningless to Americans—was heard everywhere. Since then this interest in the communistic philosophy has spread more widely than any other mystic panacea as yet sprouted by the depression.

But only to a minor degree can its persistence be credited to the Communist Party. At a recent convocation of the Third International in Moscow, the num-

ber of American comrades actually in the fold was officially placed at 30,000. About half these were admittedly foreign-born. The voice, then, of this small nucleus of Marxians, however shrill, is too frail to account for all the communistic chatter now heard throughout the land. It is evident that a widespread sympathy exists outside the party ranks.

Mr. Evelyn John St. Loe Strachey arrives in America, and, before the State Department can threaten deportation, manages to entertain clubwomen from coast to coast with lectures on the coming triumph of the proletariat. College boys and young intellectuals adopt the militant phrase, acquire faith in its implications, and join picket lines of strikers. The college professors themselves are accused of corrupting their charges with communist poison, and frightened capitalists yell for their scalps. Even the evangelical churches are constrained to purge their seminaries of Red propaganda. Further, we find interest in the new faith whooped up by magazines and publishing houses. Books that praise the Soviet Union, books sympathetic to communism (or at least to some

form of radicalism), and to Marxian interpretations of the American economy, have lately shown a great increase. And such volumes are no longer issued under obscure imprints, but often bear the names of established firms. As for journalistic radicalism, it is now provided by many of the magazines which, in the past, were not even pink, except in their decorous blushes. Indeed, old-fashioned conservatism is suspect; most of the weekly and monthly periodicals have caught up with *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, and equal, if they do not surpass, in their criticism of the American economic order, the fidgety frenzy of those cantankerous crusaders.

What explains this sudden audience eager to digest news of Karl Marx and the conquering proletariat? Any attempt at a reply is certain to be a trifle complex, for no simple, single influence brought the entire crowd en masse under the big tent. A number of those present undoubtedly find in communism a fashionable new thrill: in this spirit half-educated clubwomen have just listened to Mr. Strachey as they listened, some few years ago, to Annie Besant's reincarnated Messiah from India. Certain college youths and adolescent intellectuals are always on the side of the latest unorthodoxy: two generations ago they were liberals; one generation back they were socialists; today they embrace the newest fashion—communism. Others seated in the audience represent the crusading spirit so characteristic of American life, it having been noted many times that communism is as much religion as political theory. The doctrine asks for faith and sacrifice; it is dogmatic, intolerant, and fervid; it promises a new world and the regeneration of humanity through a simple, easily understood mass movement. In a time of wide-

spread unemployment and political uncertainty, there is little wonder that the sort of reformer who once wedged Prohibition into the Constitution should now discover a new religion in the proletariat.

But to say that communism has become fashionable—as a new intellectual thrill, or as a new crusade—only partially explains the present American sentiment. We want to know at once *why* it has become fashionable. The answer to this question is largely found in the Great Reform movement now floundering about in Washington, D. C.

For the New Deal, by its very name, and through its propaganda and acts, has crystallized one conviction in the American mind: something is wrong with the old order, hence capitalism is about to die. But as a substitute for capitalism, the New Deal itself has obvious shortcomings. Its propaganda has been successful in persuading Americans to a radical viewpoint, but its own noble experiments have been so diverse, so contradictory, and so bewildering that they have split both partisans and opposition into many factions. Amid such confusion, the subtle appeal of communism attracts many minds already weighing further radical adventures. For the contradictions of the New Deal, communism substitutes a simple theory: capitalism is dying because each year it produces a larger class of dispossessed workers—the proletariat. In the end this proletariat will be strong enough to rise, overthrow the capitalist masters, and seize the means of production for its own benefit. Not only does the simplicity of this dogma attract believers who vision themselves ready to hail a proletarian dictatorship, but it half-hypnotizes many others though they see no virtue in the scheme, and their fears inspire them to denunciation. All over the land there is a

conjuring with this new religion. Yet such a phenomenon is downright curious because the American proletariat is actually on the decline.

II

In the city of London in the year 1847, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx put forth the *Communist Manifesto*. In it they predicted an ever-increasing proletariat. Said they:

The lower strata of the Middle Class—the small tradespeople, shopkeepers and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants—all these sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminished capital does not suffice for the scale on which modern industry is carried on, and is swamped in competition with the large capitalists, partly because their specialized skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production. Thus the proletariat is recruited from all classes of the population.

And farther on:

... with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number, it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more.

These pronunciamientos were uttered eighty-eight years ago. The orthodox communist has accepted them whole-heartedly ever since: they are the backbone of his tactics; his faith in them makes him a revolutionary by violence rather than a revolutionary by any other means. But it is not the communist alone who unquestioningly believes in the growth of the proletariat; this belief has been spread abroad so widely that it is now echoed and at least half-credited by nearly every one to whom the word proletariat has any meaning at all. Communists hold to this faith and propose to act through it; so-

cialists cling to it as well and hope to compromise with it; liberals see it as a truth and romanticize about it; while even the extreme conservatives show partial credence by their willingness to be frightened by it.

Years before its current American popularity, the myth of the proletariat had been believed for so long that it became the subject for fantastic and pseudoprophetic fiction. In H. G. Wells's remarkable *Time Machine*, we discover the future proletarians living underground among their machines, while their former masters are permitted to survive in the sunlight, among the ruins of stolen splendors, merely to serve as beef and mutton for the bellies of the Titans. In the final chapter of Anatole France's *L'Île des Pingouins*, the proletarians are again earth-dwellers—muscular, numerous, mighty, and brainless, while a few overlords, with shrunken bodies and great heads, exploit them.

Recently such fictional characters have become contemporary and have taken on less incredible semblances. They are now the heroes of the Proletarian Novel—often enough stuffed shirts, but providing the background, in action and philosophy, for an increasing number of tear-jerking stories. Nowadays almost any novel with a proletarian hero and an awareness of the class struggle receives serious consideration from the critics, especially the younger newspaper hacks. It is assumed that, whether we like it or not, the proletarian will soon be running the show; his stature increases in accordance with the old Marxian prophecy; and the truly contemporary writer of fiction must give him leading roles.

This idea of a constantly expanding proletariat has never met with serious challenge. During the last century it has

become a sort of folk-faith. Meanwhile, especially in the last quarter of that century, certain developments of technology have pointed to entirely new conclusions. Seen from this viewpoint, the predictions of the *Communist Manifesto* become quaintly out of date. Nowhere is this more true than in America. Employment statistics present the facts in bold relief.

To get at these facts in mathematical form, it will be necessary to study some predetermined industrial period, recent enough to give the results of the study contemporary significance, and lengthy enough to demonstrate what influence capitalism may be having on the growth of the down-trodden. Our most accurate source is the census.

Between 1910 and 1930 we had twenty years in which the influence of the machine upon the American workman was probably greater than in any other equal span in our history. During these years, the machine emerged from crudity to refined precision. Mass production came to light, and the use of the machine was extended to huge new industries, such as those of the automobile, the aeroplane, the cinema, and the radio. In no other period was the machine exploited so extensively, or the amount of capital involved so great. If industrialism inevitably submerges more and more of the population into the proletariat, hardly a likelier period could be chosen to demonstrate the thesis.

According to the census of 1910, there were then over 38,000,000 Americans engaged in gainful employment, and their occupations were catalogued as follows, in figures of percentage:

Farmers	16.1
Wholesale and retail proprietors and managers	6.2
Members of professions.....	4.3
Clerks and salesmen.....	10.0

Foremen and skilled workmen.....	11.7
Semi-skilled workmen	14.4
Unskilled workmen	37.3

In 1930, with nearly 49,000,000 gainfully employed, the proportions had become:

Farmers	12.3
Wholesale and retail proprietors and managers	7.5
Members of professions.....	6.0
Clerks and salesmen.....	16.3
Foremen and skilled workmen.....	12.9
Semi-skilled workmen	16.3
Unskilled workmen	28.7

In these classifications,¹ what groups could constitute the proletariat? Which might be called a submerged unit, "recruited from all classes", deprived of the use of any specialized skill, its members lacking the pride of trained workmen? Obviously, in the true Marxian sense, in the sense of being significant in a possible class struggle, the proletariat is here represented by the unskilled laborers. Yet in these twenty years of intense industrial expansion, the proportion of unskilled workers dropped from 37.3 per cent to 28.7. Instead of being inevitably and automatically augmented, the proletariat has been definitely on the wane.

Countless pages have been written about the imagined effects of machines on modern life. To a number of these imaginings, especially to the idea that the machine is the master of an ever-increasing body of slaves, the figures we have just looked at provide an illuminating corrective.

In addition to a decrease of unskilled workers, what else do the figures show? They reveal two broad and related tendencies. First, in the groups of Americans

¹Most of the employment statistics given in this article are based on United States census figures as presented in two papers, the one by Alba M. Edwards, the other by J. K. Whelpton, both printed in the *Journal of the American Statistical Association*.

who are closest to the productive side of industry, they disclose not only a decline in the proportion of those without skill, but a movement in the ranks of the unskilled to the skilled. Over the twenty-year period, semi-skilled labor rose from 14.4 per cent to 16.3 per cent, while the skilled group increased from 11.7 to 12.9. Second, the figures divulge a still more significant tendency—a movement of American workers from groups directly concerned with output into groups concerned with controlling and distributing the products.

In 1910, 63.4 per cent of gainfully employed Americans fell into the classifications of skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers. But by 1930, the total of these groups had declined to 57.9 per cent. Meanwhile, over the same period, an ever-rising proportion of Americans were occupied with handling rather than making the products of industry. In 1910, 16.2 per cent of employed Americans were listed as proprietors, clerks, and salesmen. By 1930, these classifications had risen to the high figure of 23.8 per cent; while at the same time the number of professional men had been on the increase, rising from 4.3 per cent in 1910 to 6 in 1930.

From this examination, a certain broad statement is now possible. Modern capitalistic industry is resulting in something quite contrary to the expectation of Marx—it is creating a larger middle class at the direct expense of the proletariat.

III

But Marx held that the increasing use of machines would swell the numbers of the proletariat through two principal causes, already summarized in an excerpt from the *Manifesto*. Shopkeepers and small tradesmen would find themselves

unable to muster the capital for machine production, or to compete with the scale of quantity distribution. Handicraftsmen, farmers, and men with specialized skill would find the machine replacing the cunning of their hands. All these would “sink gradually into the proletariat . . . recruited from all classes of the population”.

This mass of humanity, as Marx imagined it, was to be a submerged class, bound in virtual serfdom to the machine. The number of these helpless, unskilled workers was to increase steadily. Exploited by a few capitalistic masters, and uncompensated by any vanity in a labor which was intelligent only as metallic rods and cams made it so, the pride of the proletarian was to become at last not an individual but a mass pride, a pride in the power of numbers, in a feeling of mass strength.

When Marx prophesied this ever-growing class, the machine age had already become a reality in certain countries, especially in England and America. The march of workers from farm to factory had begun. In the America of 1820, seventy-two per cent of the employed population was still on the land. By 1850, this percentage had dropped to sixty-five, with corresponding increases in the percentages of those engaged in manufacturing and trade. With each decennial census, the decline in the proportion of farmers continued, with a proportional increase of workers in trade and manufacturing. By 1880, after the passage of another thirty-year period, only forty-nine per cent of gainfully employed Americans were at work on farms. By 1910 they had fallen to thirty-two per cent.

Such a shift of employment from farm to city, however, does not signify that a population is being drawn into the prole-

tariat; the need of earning one's living in town does not make a proletarian, nor, of course, did Marx claim that it did. He defined the proletarian: in all respects a man dispossessed, one who had "sunk" into the class. Coupled with economic loss was loss of pride in his work, which had become too slavish; all that remained for him was pride in his mass strength. This is both the classic and the sentimental definition and it remains accurate today.

Yet, through the miscarriage of Marxian prophecy, which we have noted, present-day communists have been forced to depart from orthodoxy. They have been obliged to sacrifice one dogma for the sake of another; their new world is still to be established through mass revolution by the proletariat. Therefore they must have a proletariat, or there can be no class war.

But in some fashion, which this essential dogma does not permit the communists to investigate, the rise of capitalism and the triumph of the machine have not produced an overwhelmingly powerful body of classical, dispossessed workers. What really occurred is clear from the census figures just quoted. But even if there were no accurate statistical proof at hand, we could surmise that something has gone amiss with the prophecies of Marx when we observe the efforts of communists to *create* a proletariat. The dispossessed worker simply does not exist in a mass powerful enough for the class struggle.

In the proletarian novel, the laborer has his power and his being; he remains the inevitable product of capitalism and the machine. In practice, however, both in Russia and in America, communists have been obliged to take inevitability into their own hands. In Russia, inevitability

has become the State—you dispossess a peasant of his land, you place him on a collective farm, and you have a new proletarian. In America, inevitability has become a matter of affixing labels—the practical definition of a proletarian becoming broadened almost to the point where anyone who does any sort of work beyond clipping coupons is now, in essence, a member of the class. This new eligibility is illustrated by eager communist interference in disputes between employers and employees, where the latter could not possibly, by any stretching of the definition, be termed proletarians.

When it thus becomes so easy for the worker to be wooed as a proletarian, when practically any wage-earner (and, of course, any dole-taker) is eligible to the class, the name itself quickly becomes meaningless. The classical concept of the proletarian was sharply drawn. But when this brawny figure of the dispossessed worker, his fists lifted in revolutionary gesture, becomes that ineffectual and composite creature whom cartoonists label The Public, all import goes out of the class struggle. Revolution by the submerged masses fades, and what remains of the revolt against capitalism is a disorganized scramble to grab—a dole, a bonus, a share-in-the-wealth, a social credit, a technocratic assignment of so many ergs a year, a pension of \$200 a month after the age of 60, or even some crisp printing-press money.

How is this confusion of the original Marxian doctrine possible?

IV

When Karl Marx went to England to spend the years of study that resulted in *Das Kapital*, the first stages of the industrial revolution were already in full swing.

He came from an agricultural Germany to an England extensively committed to factories. It was probably not a pretty contrast. Much of that early industrialism was brutally unpleasant. In general, the factory was ugly, the machines were crude, the hours of work were still similar to those of the farm — an impossible basis for the monotonous, confining, and more exacting new labor. Wages were far too low, and the living conditions of the workers were squalid.

Marx was shrewd enough to realize that machines had come to stay, and that they would utterly change the order of human life. He also realized that step by step with their growing use, capitalism would expand. The exploitation of the machine would demand vast investments. A new world was in the making — but what sort of world?

Marx promptly predicted an enslaved one. He believed that expanding capitalism implied essentially expanding greed. Through the machine he foresaw the creation of a new class of serfs, a proletariat which was to be drawn from all existing classes of the people. On the other hand, he was aware, and his later followers were still more so, that the machine age could be an era of plenty. It was obvious that in every division of material human endeavor, machines could produce more than hands. For Marx and his disciples, this period of abundance was quite possible, but could only follow the inevitable class revolution.

These two contrary conceptions of what the machine means to the human race have, for practically a century, been a dominating theme of modern thought. Although at odds, they are usually combined. The strain runs like this: while the machine has been largely a curse, it could be a blessing. But this is an attempt to in-

terpret a civilization based on machines in terms so simple that when referred to reality, the interpretation has virtually no meaning. Throughout the years of its development, the machine has brought about none of the simple, direct, forthright consequences predicted for it. For example, at the same time that it produced a greater plenty, it stimulated the growth of populations. Thus, Germany, before the war of 1870, was still predominantly agricultural, and for some years its population growth had been, as is that of France today, at an equilibrium. After the war of 1870, Germany became industrialized, and a rapid increase of population followed. Just so have the benefits of abundance always been partially nullified by the greater number of mouths to feed.

In a growing civilization, the effect of the machine was extraordinarily more complex than anything contained in a simple effort to define that civilization as good or bad. For, from the beginning, machines were evolving; as if alive, they took on a certain behavior and acquired certain laws of being. Among these laws, a particular one soon became evident. It was this: the machine was in opposition to slavery. It would not give its utmost if the man who tended it remained too long by its side. And so little by little, it was necessary to revise a conception of working hours previously based upon farming life.

It was also discovered that the machine would yield benefits in exact proportion to its power. Consequently, throughout the modern industrial age, the *real* wages of workers — wages in terms of what the money will buy rather than in terms of dollars or any other unit of currency — have been rising on an upward curve that follows precisely the ascend-

ancy of mechanical power. It can be put this way: the wage per worker is a function of the horsepower per worker made available by machines.

As soon as mechanical power had reached the point where these effects became clear, it became obvious as well that the conception of a degraded and dispossessed proletariat was quite contrary to the facts. Each year now the machine becomes increasingly automatic, doing away with more men who formerly were needed to tend it. Indeed, this new influence has been one of the innumerable reasons put forward to explain unemployment and the depression. But such an explanation is false, for while machines use fewer men, they turn out more goods. This increased production has required larger technical staffs, more office workers, more managers, more salesmen, and over the twenty-year period previously studied, the proportion of these wage-earners increased by nine per cent. It is quite probable that within a few years, we shall observe a startling acceleration in this trend which the depression has, for the time being, contrived to halt.

The American workman who may approximate a true Marxian proletarian will rapidly become more rare, for the electric eye will take over his simple, monotonous routine. The delicate, intelligent, flexible mechanisms of a future close at hand will require almost no human brawn — the men who serve them will be men of skill. And the number of employables concerned with distributing industrial products will increase.

Huge new industries are in the offing — the impulse to their swift development is restrained for the moment only by the antics of the New Dealers. But there are obvious signs that the New Deal is on the wane, and as it passes so will pass the enor-

mous class of current dole-takers which, if it were to remain fixed in our economy, might in the end constitute a sort of special proletariat. But the coming expansion of industry will absorb these unemployed. There are visible portents: for example, the modern auxiliaries of housing — air-conditioning and the like — will soon have widespread realization; the face of the countryside and the form of cities will take new shapes; and in these vast enterprises, millions will find skilled work and usefulness. Melancholy predictions of tens of millions permanently on the dole will go into the limbo of many other extravagances bred by the depression.

One of these extravagances is the notion that current unemployment immensely overshadows that of any former American depression. It does — in numbers. But when these numbers are placed in ratio to the population, we discover that there have been other depressions with the proportion of jobless men nearly as great. For instance, in his *Real Wages in the United States*, Paul H. Douglas presents statistics for a period of twenty-nine years, beginning with 1897. In that year, the unemployed constituted eighteen per cent of the workers chosen by Douglas for his study. In 1921 it increased to 23.1 per cent. What is it today? We do not know exactly — the estimates range from the modest figure of 10,000,000 to the probably extravagant figure of 20,000,000. A mean of 15,000,000 is 30.6 per cent of the 49,000,000 gainfully employed in 1929 — no very large increase over the proportion of jobless workers in 1921.

As these unemployed return to work, their new tasks will remove greater numbers from the ranks of the unskilled. The proletariat has already declined; and that decline, at a swifter and swifter pace, will continue.

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS, BOOK-BOOSTER

BY JOHN BAKELESS

IT is only too true that the Lampson Professor of English Literature, Emeritus, in Yale University, is one of the few really powerful literary despots in North America. A word, a nod, a wreathed smile from Professor William Lyon Phelps, a twinkle of the Phelpsian eye, a twirl of the Phelpsian pen, and the meanest author's reputation may be made overnight. Recipients of the Phelpsian accolade have been for years the modern Byrons: they know what it is to go to bed hacks and wake up, still hacks, but famous. The Professor is a one-man Book-of-the-Day Club, the Oracle of the Printing Press, God's gift to the bookstore clerk, the publicity man's pride and joy, one of the greatest endorsers ever to spill adjectives on a flaming dust-jacket. The erring New York editor who accidentally referred to him as the "Samson Professor" was not far wrong. Professor Phelps's power is quite as great as the ancient temple-tipper's, even if his attitude toward the Philistines is much more friendly.

The only serious competition the good Professor meets in the endorsing field comes from Alexander Woollcott, who has of late risen to share the power and the glory of the New Hazlitt of New Haven. The rich and meaty Woollcott chuckle, endorsing a book on the radio, will bring a flood of telegraphed orders from as far west as the Pacific, and except for the faithful ladies who still throng to the Phelpsian lectures, Mr. Woollcott has more or less

displaced the Professor as the literary dictator of New York. But the women's clubs and lecture audiences of that vast area stretching 3000 miles west of Hoboken are still loyal to Yale. After all, the Old Master has been in the book-endorsing business for a whole generation; and Woollcott, while he has demonstrated his ability to turn a new book into a best-seller, has yet to raise the forgotten volumes of yesteryear from the dust under the counter, and make them sell like new. Worse still, Woollcott usually endorses good books. Professor Phelps can endorse almost *any* book and make it sell.

Examples of the incredible power of the facile Phelpsian fountain pen are plentiful. Some twenty years after the publication of Louis Tracy's *Wings of the Morning*, Professor Phelps chanced to mention it. A single New York bookstore sold 3000 copies on the strength of that recommendation alone. Six years after Warwick Deeping's *House of Adventure* had quietly ended a mild sale, Professor Phelps gave it a single sentence of comment — and two entirely new printings had to be rushed to press immediately. His discovery that A. S. M. Hutchinson was "a spiritual force", and his *If Winter Comes* "an important work of art", turned that now forgotten novel into a best-seller at once. When he discovered that Thornton Wilder had "something akin" to genius and was "a star of the first magnitude", the faithful descended on the bookstores in