

# *The Middle Class Today and Tomorrow:* **The New World of Socialism**

JOSEPH FREEMAN

**W**HAT will happen to the middle class under socialism? Today, this question need not be considered from the purely theoretical viewpoint. We already have the living example of the Soviet Union. We know now from experience that socialism actually does replace production for profit with production for the benefit of society. Economic activity in this new world is determined not by the profits of the capitalist, but by the needs of society. This results in the complete liberation of all the forces of production, of all the creative and constructive impulses of man.

The objective of socialism is the abolition of all classes and all class differences. For the purpose of establishing socialism, the big bourgeoisie is the first class to be eliminated. The middle class and its individual members are absorbed into the unity of collective labor which is the basis of socialist life. As the new system advances upon the rising level of technique and production, the workers and farmers also disappear as *classes*, and we have the classless society of socialist citizens, each working in his own field toward the common goal.

Socialism nationalizes the means of production and distribution, destroys the old capitalist state and replaces it with the state of the workers and farmers. In exceptional cases, members of the big bourgeoisie may accept and adapt themselves to the new social order. Thus, Vice-Commissar of War Kamenev was a general in the czarist army; and various Soviet enterprises contain managers who were formerly factory owners. But the exploiting bankers and manufacturers must disappear as a class along with the capitalist system which produced them.

The industrial workers, who are the dominant force in socialist economy and the socialist state, transform themselves while transforming society. In liberating themselves from capitalism, they liberate all other useful social groups, for they have no one under them to exploit. As general knowledge and technical skill become universal, and as all classes disappear, they, too, become socialist citizens instead of a separate class.

In the village, socialism destroys the capitalist foundation of classes through the industrialization and collectivization of agriculture. Under socialism, the gulf which separates the city from the country disappears; the farmer is no longer a farmer in the old sense. In the Soviet Union, the peasant, once a beast of burden, has climbed through industrialization and collectivization to higher living standards and to a higher

culture. With our advanced technique, the American sharecropper would make even more rapid progress under socialism. The vague term "middle class" includes not an independent class, like the proletariat or the bourgeoisie, but those middle strata of the population of whom the non-exploiting farmers constitute a large part. For these farmers the dramatic rise of the Soviet peasant is an extraordinary object lesson in the ways of socialism.

In this planned and unified social system the members of the middle class not only find their place, but they also find a life of security and growth impossible for them under capitalism. The old middle class of small independent business men disappears as a social grouping and its individuals become absorbed in the collective economy of socialism; the functional groups of the middle class become part of the new community of labor.

In the Soviet Union, for example, former owner-managers of small enterprises have become employees either of the state or of the cooperatives. As employees, they are guaranteed and actually enjoy the fundamental rights to work and to receive a secure income; they are free of the dependent relations of capitalist industry; they have the security of an all-inclusive social-insurance system; they have increased leisure and the increase of personal freedom which leisure makes possible; they have constantly increasing living standards and the fullest access to art and culture.

These enormous gains are most evident in the case of the functional groups of the middle class, primarily of the technological professions, such as engineers, chemists, architects, physicists and economists; and of the service professions, such as doctors, dentists, writers, artists, newspapermen, actors and teachers.

Under socialism, engineers, architects, scientists and technologists of various kinds hold an especially important place. Socialism can develop only on the basis of increased productivity, and the abolition of private profit abolishes all artificial limits to demand. As a result, effort is concentrated on the development of science and technique. Every facility is placed at the disposal of the technological professions for growth and creative labor.

Every honest observer has been amazed at the expansion and progress of science and technology in the Soviet Union. But this is nothing to be amazed at. These advances are inherent in socialism. The moment you

relieve production from its capitalist burdens, the moment you coordinate and plan and push economy to higher and higher levels, that moment the scientist and technologist becomes an honored and indispensable man. Under capitalism today, the professional is the victim of salary cuts and unemployment; he is thrown into the street because he can no longer bring the capitalist profit. Big Business, caught in a crisis of its own making, retards science, suppresses inventions, withholds means for research. The vast possibilities of modern science are frustrated by a system which can no longer make progress. In the Soviet Union there has been a striking increase in the number of scientists and scientific institutions, in discovery and invention, in the collaboration between the workers at the factory bench and the scientist in the laboratory.

Moreover, under socialism economy becomes more and more a matter of organization, management and supervision. And these functions are divested of the characteristics which mark them under the exploitation of capitalism. The work of the economist, the accountant, the manager, the chemist, the physicist, the architect, the engineer, is encouraged as a form of productive social labor. That is why there has been so great an increase in the number of these professionals in the U.S.S.R.

This is equally true of the service professions. In the Soviet Union the doctor and the dentist have security and prestige and opportunity for free development because medicine is socialized. Under capitalism there are a few rich doctors who multiply the visits of their patients and encourage operations because these mean profit. There are patent-medicine rackets so rich that no one succeeds in stopping them. There are a mass of doctors who are poor because the workers do not get sufficient wages to take care of their health, and millions who need medical attention but have no money for it. In the socialist society of the Soviet Union the doctor is paid by the state to keep his patients well. His income is the same whether he performs ten operations or none. This places the emphasis upon socialized preventive medicine—equally good for the patient, the doctor, and society as a whole.

The remarkable growth of education and of the arts in the Soviet Union is also inherent in the socialist system. The bourgeois ideal of property as the chief expression of the personality is replaced by the socialist idea of creative cultural labor. Knowledge, art and culture in general be-

come not the property of a privileged caste, but an integral part of the whole of life and of all the people. Hence the increase in the number of schools, newspapers, theaters, cultural clubs which is so striking a feature of Soviet life. Socialism moves toward universal knowledge, toward the enlightenment of the whole community. This means not only security for the educator, the artist, the actor, the newspaperman; it also means something equally important for the so-called service professions—the opportunity for the fullest self-expression and the highest development of their creative functions.

Under socialism, the problem of the useful, functional groups in the middle class is relatively simple. Somewhat more complicated is the position of the small businessman. Representing an outmoded form of production and distribution, he must make a special effort to adapt himself to the new social order. But once he realizes that his interests are with socialism rather than capitalism, his place in the new order offers him many advantages over his old status. At present he is crushed by monopoly capital; he pays high taxes, is squeezed to the wall by the trusts and the chain stores; his business is ruined by the reduction in the income and the living standards of his customers, the workers, farmers and professionals. His typical lot in the crisis is bankruptcy or unendurable debt.

The small businessmen may be divided roughly into two categories. They are either small independent producers with sweatshops that have no machines; or distributors like the small storekeeper. The small producers who own and manage their small enterprises, work themselves and sometimes employ a few workers. In the Soviet Union such people joined producers' cooperatives. Instead of having ten small individual producers on ten adjacent blocks, these men got together and established one cooperative shop in which all ten worked. They received machinery and raw materials from the socialist state on a preferential basis. They got concessions in taxes. In this way, they developed a more efficient and more productive organization than the ten little shops which they formerly had. Above all, they had economic security and the opportunity to advance their economic lot because they were relieved of the burden of competition. In this way the small producer eventually entered the cooperative system, or became an employe often in the highly paid managerial personnel of a state large-scale factory.

The producers' cooperatives do not divide their income equally. Under socialism, such incomes, like the wages of the industrial workers, depend on the individual's output. But there is every incentive and every opportunity for the individual to improve his abilities, to increase his output. Prices are regulated by the socialist state, and there are no profits in the capitalist sense. As

Soviet citizens, the members of the cooperatives are entitled to all the social benefits of the socialist system; but they also have their own social insurance, their own hospitals, club rooms, reading rooms, cultural organizations. Moreover, there is an All-Union Organization of Producers' Cooperatives. In this way members of the former middle class have advantages they never enjoyed under capitalism. Instead of being an isolated, helpless little businessman, with no real voice in the national economy or the affairs of state, the former small producer is now a member of a powerful organization with tremendous economic, social and political influence. His interests are represented in the general interests of the socialist society of which he is a citizen.

The second group of small businessmen, the distributors—owners of grocery and clothing stores, for example—enter the consumers' cooperatives. Socialism abolishes all private trade. The chain stores, like the A. & P., would be taken over by society on a national scale; the small stores would be organized into consumers' cooperatives.

Under capitalism, the small store owner exploits his employes and has sharp conflicts with them; the need for profit compels him to take advantage of the consumer, too. He competes fiercely with his rivals and either gobbles them up or they gobble him up. He is insecure; he may be wiped out by the "business cycle," or taken over by the chain stores or closed by the banks that hold his mortgage. He loses money because of changing fashions artificially introduced by the big manufacturers. Health, accident and death in the family are solely his private concern; he pays for them when he can, or goes without them when the "business cycle" drives him into poverty and bankruptcy. In short, he is a lamb among the wolves of capitalism.

Under socialism, the same man enters a consumers' cooperative. He is freed of the insane struggle for profit. He neither exploits nor is exploited; he has neither fierce competitors nor trusts to devour him. Capitalism has been abolished and planned economy introduced, hence no crises to ruin him. There are no artificially induced changes in style for private profit, hence no loss on stocks. He has the benefits of social insurance, socialized medicine, art and culture, both from the state and from his own consumers' cooperative. In short, he is a creative, secure citizen in a socialist society.

Apart from these economic advantages, the sections of the middle class have much to gain socially and politically from socialism. The dictatorship of the proletariat ceases to be a bugaboo when its real nature is grasped. The capitalists established a dictatorship in order to destroy outmoded feudal relations and to establish a new social order. Today they maintain their power and profits by a dictatorship which represses the workers, farmers and lower middle classes. The proletariat establishes a dicta-

torship in order to destroy capitalism and inaugurate socialism.

It is a dictatorship of ninety-nine percent of the people over the one percent which exploited them. But socialism itself stimulates the forces which eventually make the dictatorship superfluous. Already the Second Five Year Plan, which terminates in 1937, has set the goal of abolishing those factors which create classes and class differences. This means that the workers, farmers and functional groups of the former middle class are to be merged into a higher and freer unity of socialist creative labor. In this way, the dictatorship is steadily modified until in time it disappears altogether. According to Sidney and Beatrice Webb, democracy is more widespread and more actual in the U.S.S.R. than anywhere else in the world. In the long run, the socialist state will be replaced by the self-governing community of labor, and there will be communism.

The Soviet Union is the first stage in the world-wide socialist society; and socialism is the first stage toward communism. Under socialism there are no classes and no class differences; but there still exist differences between mental and manual labor and differences in income based on ability and output; and the state exists. Under communism there will be no distinction between mental and manual labor; income will be based on the rule: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs; and the state, in the phrase of Engels, will "wither away."

The Soviet Union has been cited as an example because it is the first socialist state in the world. The United States, despite its technical advances, will naturally learn from Soviet experience, whose main outlines are generally applicable. But a socialist America would start with certain advantages. It took the Soviet Union years of heroic effort to achieve the industrial and technical base indispensable for socialism. That base already exists in the United States. We also have an adequate supply of skilled labor and trained professionals to operate the existing industries, laboratories, and institutions at their maximum capacity. Moreover, America's workers, farmers and professionals are learning from the Soviet Union's experience. They have seen that socialism "works." Consequently, our professional and intellectual workers, as distinguished from the old Russian intelligentsia, can enter the socialist system at once and with greater understanding. Finally, a large part of our middle class has been proletarianized by the crisis. It understands more and more that its way out is not fascism, but socialism. If the professionals and technologists and teachers and writers cooperate with the workers and the farmers in establishing the new order, we have every facility for a rapid advance toward a socialist America where civilization can reach heights hitherto undreamed of in this country.



# REVIEW AND COMMENT

## Books the Middle Class Reads

THE reading public as a whole, assuming that the literate population above the age of ten all reads something, totals 90 millions. Discounting overlappings, 40 million of them buy newspapers, 30 million buy magazines, 26 million read books drawn from the public libraries, between two or three millions rent their books and from two to five hundred thousand buy them.

Such studies as the Lynds' *Middletown* would indicate that the majority of public-library users are workers and their children. Observation would indicate that rental libraries are patronized chiefly by the women of the middle and lower sections of the middle classes—the housewives in the residential sections, and the various grades of clerks in the business districts. As a group the middle-class reads fewer books than its educational advantages and its supposed influence in American life would call for, and this applies generally to its apathetic participation in the cultural life of the country.

I think it might safely be said that where there is book ownership there is book influence. In the Soviet Union, for example, books hold a high place and there, in spite of the immense expansion of public-library facilities, there has been a simultaneous expansion of personal book-ownership. In the United States there has been a simultaneous shrinkage of both. Here the movies and the radio are usually held responsible for the limited circulation of books, but the movies and the radio flourish equally in the Soviet Union. The causes lie deeper.

More important as factors are the prevailing insecurity of life, the prevalent cynicism, which keeps reading a diversion rather than an activity, the drastic drop in average income, which automatically takes book purchasing out of the range of most people and the demoralization of family life. In a stable and comfortable home a library is a desirable fixture, but for the relative nomads that Americans have become it is a burden. Books are high-priced because of the small market for them; and the high price reciprocally limits the market. Since the depression the never-large total of book publishers has decreased by about a fifth, while discharges of workers by the survivors have further reduced the personnel of the industry.

The influence of books, however, remains substantial. While the reading circles, lyceums and literary societies that were once a feature of American social life have declined, books have preserved their prestige. It remains the form in which substantial literary reputations are made, partly because

of their relative permanence as contrasted with periodical literature, still more because the apparatus of book reviewing, which even the Hearst press considered a desirable circulation feature, adds to their influence. A best seller that has found 100,000 purchasers probably reaches through private borrowing and the two kinds of library circulation, a million readers and may be read about by several millions more in book review columns and articles. The reputations thus made are bought by the big magazines and Hollywood and in that way come to exert some influence. Hollywood's treatment of *It Can't Happen Here* indicates how little range that influence is given, when it threatens to have any political effect. Commercialized literature, in turn, has far more effect upon the writer, no matter how celebrated, than the celebrated writer has upon it. Most of the hired, high-class writers are speedily leveled down to the Hollywood and Lorimer standard and made innocuous.

The book business is a peculiarly ambiguous one. Its position in the reading trades is analogous in some respects to that of the subsidized opera company and symphony orchestra in the music field. But, with the exception of the University publishers, it operates without a subsidy and exists frankly on the profit incentive. If there were no market for books of some literary pretension they would not be published, and our book publishers would have little compunction about putting between book covers the same stuff dealt in by Hearst, Macfadden and Lorimer. Where it turns out to be profitable, as in the fiction provided for the circulating libraries, it is done cheerfully enough. Book publishers are checked by the persistent taste for good writing and for better than standardized thinking, and by the existence of a corps of about a thousand book reviewers, many of them writers themselves, who exercise a professional standard of judgment high enough, at any rate, to help keep publishing somewhere within reach of literature. For that reason publishers' lists are spotty. It is possible for the same publisher, in the same year, to bring out an unquestioned masterpiece like Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, and Warner Fabian's *Flaming Youth*. To the book-publisher's great annoyance, his readers' taste cannot be standardized in the editorial offices as it is in the periodical press. Books are therefore a more responsive and accurate register of current taste and opinion than the periodical press where, it might be said, the organs of thought and choice have been carefully defunctionalized. A study of best

sellers over a period of years would therefore be of value.

Such a list was prepared and interpreted in a recent article in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, by Frederick Lewis Allen, author of *Only Yesterday*. Mr. Allen noted that the prosperity and self-satisfaction of America at the turn of the century was reflected in the smug security of its best-selling fiction.

About 1905 a questioning note appeared. Among the best sellers were Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* which indicted the shallowness of upper-class life, and Winston Churchill's *Coniston*, an unflattering picture of New England politics. Until 1917, through what Mr. Allen nicely describes as "the sugary years," when literary sweets were consumed in great quantity, some books dealing realistically with American life managed to come to the top. By 1919 the sale of non-fiction had grown to such a point that its best sellers were also listed. Taste in books generally had by that time broadened out to a point where it seemed to indicate that the American reading public had arrived at what might be called its age of maturity.

That is Mr. Allen's opinion. He notes the tendency toward escape-seeking; he notes the decline in religious authority and freer sexual attitudes. The optimistic conclusions he draws from what he seems to regard as a liberation of the spirit of inquiry, a broadening of interests, and a rise in the level of taste seem to me unwarranted. In my own interpretation I will not limit myself to the top best sellers, but to all books which exerted influence. In this respect the books of Sherwood Anderson though they did not reach the top rungs, and books like Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, were more important than the pacemakers.

The interest in escape books was even more noticeable in non-fiction than in fiction. Travel books like *White Shadows of the South Seas* and still more, Keyserling's *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher* which wafted the reader away in spiritual as well as geographical distance, showed that people felt insecure in America and that from any concept of a good life it had become uninhabitable. The fact that this taste appeared coincidentally with the emigration of intellectuals, some of whom, including Santayana, Eliot, Pound, H.D., and Laura Riding have never returned, is significant.

The interest in international affairs and in general political and economic problems had a special character. The world war had ended the myth of American isolation; Americans felt dragged into the stream of history and wanted to know where this current was taking them. The questioning that