

REVIEW AND COMMENT

Walter Lippmann: the debacle of a mind—LaGuardia, the progressive—Revolt in Asturias and America in the Far East

ACCORDING to Walter Lippmann's publishers, *The Good Society** is his "most significant book." I am inclined to agree with them. In its scope, in its pretensions, and in its air of finality, it is by far Mr. Lippmann's most serious effort in the sphere of economics and politics. And the book is significant, not only because it represents the considered result of Lippmann's thinking during the two decades since the Great War, but also because Lippmann has come to be, in the field of writing, the fair-haired boy, the acclaimed favorite, the intellectual hope of American finance capitalism.

The argument of *The Good Society* is that the major ills which beset mankind today are all due to the increasing encroachments of what Mr. Lippmann calls authoritarian collectivism, which is based on the principle that men can be made happy through the coercive power of the state and the centralized planning of economic activity. The primary examples of this malign collectivism are Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, Soviet Russia, and President Roosevelt's New Deal. There are, to be sure, certain differences between these various collectivisms—Mr. Roosevelt's, for instance, is a *gradual* collectivism—but they all make the same fundamental assumptions and are leading in substantially the same direction. In the place of corrupting and disastrous collectivist planning, Mr. Lippmann calls for a return to true liberalism. This means, not the old system of *laissez faire*, but a capitalism, the basic principles of which are division of labor and free market and in which there is ample room for the necessary degree of social control and reform.

I can hardly begin to mention the numerous logical contradictions, errors in fact, and fantasia of interpretation, which the author so blithely and generously distributes throughout the presentation of his truly remarkable thesis. In order to prove that planning can exist only in a society that is "both bellicose and poor," Mr. Lippmann has to twist beyond recognition or shut his eyes to almost everything of importance that has gone on in Soviet Russia since the revolution of 1917 and especially the tremendous economic and cultural developments of the past ten years. Instead of acknowledging the obvious fact that the threat of war has enormously handicapped the first two Five-Year Plans, Lippmann claims that the threat of war is what has made any Soviet planning possible and that "when Russia no longer feels the need of mobilization, it will become necessary to liquidate the planning authority."

Instead of recognizing the backwardness of industry in czarist Russia and its irrational,

uneconomical concentration in a few regions, Mr. Lippmann argues that the laying of a heavy industrial base for the socialist economy and the building of some of it in strategically invulnerable parts of the country demonstrates that the primary objective of Soviet planning has been military and not the improvement of the standard of life. Crowning folly of all, in order to demonstrate that planning is incompatible with democracy, the author tells us that "a plan subject to change from month to month or even from year to year is not a plan." Yet the Soviet Five-Year Plans possess precisely this sort of flexibility and are in actuality altered from year to year and month to month to keep pace with changing and unforeseen conditions.

In the light of all this, it is not surprising to find that Mr. Lippmann dismisses the epoch-making new Soviet constitution in a contemptuous footnote, and that he slurs over and slanders the long and noteworthy Soviet record on behalf of world peace. Now I stress Mr. Lippmann's analysis of the Soviet Union because it is absolutely central to his thesis. If, moreover, one sets out to write the great, the classic refutation of collectivism and planning, it would seem that one might feel called upon to visit the only country in the world where a real planned economy has been functioning. But the omniscient Walter Lippmann has never so much as set foot in Russia, though he goes abroad at least once a year. So he makes up for any lack of first-hand knowledge by citing as his chief references such "objective" authorities as Max Eastman and the White Russian economists, Boris Brutzkus and M. Polanyi.

When we come to Mr. Lippmann's positive program, we do not find much improvement in his methods of analysis. It was after 1870, he states, that the collectivist movement, the root of all evil, came into its ascendancy. But long before 1870 the capitalist world was affected with the cycle of boom and depression, mass unemployment and mass misery, imperialism and war. The golden age of liberalism and the free market upon which Mr.

Lippmann looks back with such longing was not, after all, a very happy one for the vast majority of mankind. Furthermore, Lippmann calmly overlooks the deep-lying capitalist contradictions which brought about the breakdown of liberalism and particularly neglects the inexorable effects of the profit motive in leading businessmen themselves to whittle away the free market by such devices as tariffs and huge monopolist corporations. Mr. Lippmann proceeds to outline an agenda for liberalism. And his fatal inconsistency here is that he advocates a series of social reforms which sound very much like the New Deal which he so despises, and which would entail many of the same collectivist and governmental controls which he denounces in an earlier part of the book.

To put it briefly, the author's easy solution for all our troubles is for capitalism to return to the days of its radiant youth. But the sequence of events in this hard, hard world is irreversible; it is not so simple to turn back the clock of history a hundred years. And I think it is true to say of Mr. Lippmann what he himself says of Herbert Spencer: that he is defending positions which have in fact been abandoned by events.

The advertisements state that Walter Lippmann put "twenty years of study, three years of writing" into *The Good Society*. If this is true—and I have no reason to doubt it—then this book represents the definitive debacle of a mind that once was most promising, of a sometime scholar who has forgotten the meaning of scholarship. The result of Lippmann's greatest intellectual effort is as complete and muddled a failure as I have ever seen. Mr. Lippmann and the business interests for whom he is spokesman have been thinking hard for twenty years. And at the end of that time they have just exactly nothing to offer to a confused yet aspiring generation.

CORLISS LAMONT.

Rise of a Progressive

LAGUARDIA, by Jay Franklin. *Modern Age Books*. 35c.

THIS book was a long time coming, but it is finally here. If it weren't written by columnist Jay Franklin, someone else would have had to undertake it. For a biography of Fiorello Henrico LaGuardia, irrespective of his political relationship to you or me, is manifestly in order.

Clearly the political history of the Little Flower is more than just another biography of a man in public life; it is a chart of the development of a characteristic section of the progressive movement in the United States. Mr. LaGuardia early in his political career linked his fate with that of the progressive



Jack Kahat

* THE GOOD SOCIETY, by Walter Lippmann. Little, Brown & Co. \$3.

movement in the country, and his development shows the same general curves and zig-zags that a chart of that movement would show.

Thus Franklin introduces to us not Fiorello LaGuardia, "the little Wop" who made good, but an extraordinarily energetic being who showed—and still shows—the strength and weaknesses of the indigenous progressivism—pragmatic at its roots and largely affected by the petty-bourgeois populist traditions of the West. Franklin clearly essays more than the chronological history of a progressive; he seeks to bare the roots of American progressivism.

By progressivism, it must be noted, Franklin has the traditional meaning in mind—the progressivism of the LaFollettes, George Norris, and the other homeless insurgents of the West who never were comfortable in either of the major parties and are only now beginning to find their place in a new political realignment. LaGuardia, who spent his early youth in the West and his formative legislative years in Congress with Norris and the elder LaFollette, absorbed much of their outlook.

Born in a Varick Street tenement in 1882, son of the Italian cornetist, Achille LaGuardia, and Irene Coen Luzzatti, of a Venetian Jewish family, baby Fiorello was soon taken to the West. Father Achille was an army bandmaster and the family lived for most of Fiorello's childhood and adolescent years in the atmosphere of a frontier military reservation.

Came the Spanish-American War and father Achille contracted dysentery from eating "en-balmed beef." Seeking to recover his health, the ailing father took his family to Budapest, but died shortly after they arrived there, leaving the eighteen-year-old Fiorello to take care of himself and his mother.

There followed a temporary clerkship at the American consul-general's office in Budapest and a few months later a job as acting consular agent at Fiume at three hundred dollars a year. That was the period in which the young man won recognition for defending the interests of immigrants against the whims of the Austro-Hungarian royalty. When he reached the age of twenty-one, he was officially appointed acting consular agent at one thousand dollars a year and during the years 1904-05 sandwiched in a pleasant *gemütlich* existence while learning Italian, German, Croatian, Magyar, and a bit of French.

Back in the United States in 1906, young Fiorello worked at various jobs and finally landed a spot as interpreter for the Labor Department at \$1320 a year. Here he worked by day and studied law by night, getting his degree at New York University in 1910.

Politics clearly beckoned. But where to break in? Writes Franklin:

From the practical point of view, LaGuardia had to be a New York City Republican—and an irregular one, at that—if he were to get anywhere in a political career. Where the Democrats had cornered the Irish vote, the Republicans had won a majority of the Italian vote throughout the nation, and with a Fusion administration on the way in

the city it would have been folly for the young western lawyer to identify himself with Tammany Hall. It proved almost as hard for LaGuardia to identify himself with the Republican organization, which was in more or less friendly cahoots with the Tammany outfit, under a sort of general understanding that reform waves come and go but politicians must eat all the year round.

In 1914 he ran for Congress, got the expected beating in a Tammany stronghold, but made such a good showing that Republican Governor Charles S. Whitman appointed him a deputy attorney-general. In 1916 he was elected. The war hysteria was on, and LaGuardia pledged that if he voted for war he would enlist himself. He did both and served in the air corps on the Italian front. Returning, he defeated Scott Nearing in a hot congressional contest after publicly debating with his opponent. In 1919 he was elected president of the N. Y. Board of Aldermen.

This period is of particular significance in his career. The "Red scare" was at its height and Attorney-General A. Mitchell Palmer was Red-raiding the length and breadth of the land. "Bolshevism," according to the staidest of our pillars, was under every bed. It was at this time, February 1920, that LaGuardia wrote about the tory howl against "Bolshevism":

It is used by the sweatshop owner when he speaks of his men demanding a living wage. It is howled by the profiteer. It is ranted forth by rotten political leaders.

Continues Franklin on this subject:

He (LaGuardia) went on to show that the demand for high wages was reasonable, that the amount needed was relatively minute, and that the reactionary employers who demanded "law and order" denied "law and order" to those of whom they complained as Bolsheviks.

His more recent career is fairly well known—his insurgency in Congress, his guerrilla warfare with the Republican high command, his congressional support of most progressive issues, his defeat by Tammany's Lanzetta in 1932, and his election as Fusion mayor of New York in 1933.

That the man has aligned himself with the broad general progressive movement in the

country a study of Mr. Franklin's book makes clear. That he is a figure of national importance is also self-evident.

LaGuardia's weaknesses on the whole were those of the progressive movement, Franklin implies. Because there existed no powerful people's-front movement, no effective third-party movement, LaGuardia and the other progressives "had" to fight from inside of the two major parties and ally themselves only on occasion with movements outside of these. One of LaGuardia's chief weaknesses—the major weakness of the liberals in American politics, in fact—is hardly touched on by Franklin. That is, of course, their fear of theory, their blind worship of rule-of-thumb politics.

It is this that seemingly gives many of their actions the "bad" smell of too-too "practical" politics, like an endorsement of George U. Harvey. Lacking a guiding theory, they are often subject to pessimism and panic. They seek the middle-of-the-road policy of attempting to placate the people and reaction simultaneously, efforts which earn them only the contempt of the Tories and weaken their popular support.

All of this has been illustrated over and over again in the current mayoralty campaign. Marxists understand this phenomenon and reject the attitude of sterile doctrinaires, so fashionable today among certain Socialists, of applying a foot-rule to types like LaGuardia. Communists understand that the LaGuardias are a product of the peculiar development of the American social structure, with all the strength, weakness, and peculiarities of the type. Communists are often sharply critical of the progressives, but they never forget that, with all their limitations, they are today an organic and indispensable part of the broad movement against reaction in the United States.

From this point of view a study of the Franklin biography—despite its occasional effusive and blurb-like character—will prove of real value to earnest progressives seeking to fight fascism in the United States. By shedding light on one outstanding figure in the country's progressive movement, Mr. Franklin's book serves to teach us more about the real elements of the developing people's-front movement in the United States and to clear the atmosphere of both utopian illusions and arid doctrinairism.

S. W. GERSON.

Signal to Attack

REHEARSAL IN OVIEDO, by Joseph Peyré. Translated by R. H. Torres. Knight. \$2.

THE reading public owes a very real debt to writers like Malraux, Bates, and now in a smaller but genuine way to Joseph Peyré, for they are men who bring to first rank writing material which deeply concerns the future of the world. News reportage like Agnes Smedley's is needed; documentation like *From Spanish Trenches* is greatly



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