

National Guilds

*National Guilds and the State, by S. G. Hobson.
New York: The Macmillan Co.*

THE state has been under a running fire for more than two hundred years. The middle class stripped it of its majesty and mystery when they denied its divine origin and shifted its foundation to popular consent. They further weakened it for ethical purposes by saying that it was an evil at best (the less government the better, etc.) and by refusing to permit its intervention in industry to relieve intolerable economic conditions. And yet, though they laughed privately at its blundering inefficiency, they relied upon its power in times of social disorder, entrusted to it the redemption of the backward places of the earth under the banner of imperialism, and conferred upon it a substantial monopoly of education. Strangely enough, but with good reason, an organism regarded as inefficient and inept in matters of economy, was thought worthy of control over the spirit of man! In spite of all misgivings, the state grew stronger and stronger and waxed fatter and fatter. Whoever questions this may look upon the world's groaning statute books and multiplying administrative machinery.

The working classes, coming upon the historical scene, and being greeted by the resounding whacks of police constables' clubs, demanded the ballot. But bold spirits among them very early had doubts. On beholding the pomp, tinsel, gaols, gallows, and alms house they spoke with disdain of "the same old conspiracy against mankind." Therefore, some of them said, the state must be rooted up, overturned, utterly extirpated and then we shall dwell together in brotherly love. A few thought this possible but most people attended celebrations, prize fights, and movies as before.

Then came the socialist, advocate of the great state democratized. In the new and blessed order, we were assured, there would be no political state with its long train of abuses, its poor houses and prisons. The administration of things would take the place of the government of men. That was a cheerful hope. The political state, decrepit and corrupt, would give way to the economic state, the board of aldermen to the central federated craft union, and the august Congress of the United States to a convention of the American Federation of Labor and allied powers, industrial and agrarian. Then all at once Lenin and Trotsky were supposed to have turned the trick.

According, however, to news that has leaked out through the Allied blockade, Lenin and Trotsky have something that looks like a state. To be sure, it has another name, but as in the case of the rose the odor is the same. Some of us who are of a sceptical turn of mind may be pardoned if we are unable to distinguish between a political state run by the representatives of the working classes and an economic state run by the same agents. Are there not in Russia officers, armies, gaols, gallows, authorities, courts, and the power to compel obedience? Does the elimination of the alms house (or the substitution of a universal poor house) spell the doom of the state? It is possible, barely possible, that a man endowed with the power to enforce his will or the will of anybody else may look very much the same whether he is called "comrade commissaire" or "comrade governor." One may even be pardoned for suspecting that N. Lenin laughs softly, when

he reads in New York dispatches that the state has been overthrown in Russia.

The English have no delusions on that point. They are a very practical people. They did not need an Encyclopaedia as a forerunner to the execution of Charles I. The modern English have long distrusted the state. John Bright did not think it competent to interfere with the conduct of his business. The new radical looks upon it as a dangerous, top-heavy bureaucracy, providing comfortable places for the black-coated proletariat, benevolent, perhaps, in intention, but hopeless. One apostle of direct action, sneering at parliamentary loquacity, announced that his union had got a big increase in wages by "heaving" a few bricks—more in a two weeks' strike than in fifty years of talk at Westminster. To the simple minded the logic was evident: Enough bricks carefully thrown will usher in the millennium. Bernard Shaw laughed.

Following closely upon the heels of the direct actionists, came the guildsmen for whom Mr. S. G. Hobson now speaks. They, too, feared or disliked the state. Some of them could hardly tell whom they hated the more—Sidney Webb or Bonar Law. They saw, or thought they saw, many things: the state as a crude implement of capitalism (predatory though benevolent), the waste and stupidity of the bureaucracy, the skill and action of the organized crafts, the rise of labor with a will to power, the necessity of production, the longing of the workingman for a decent place in the sun, and the futility of parliamentary debate. They proposed to place industry and transportation in the hands of the crafts and professions. It seemed simple. At all events it was a good answer to Sidney Webb and the bureaucrats.

Still some guildsmen had misgivings. Those who went all the way with Kropotkin and pinned their faith to self-sufficing communities combining handicrafts and agriculture could easily dispense with the state, although some of them feared that defense against less angelic neighbors might call for an army. Others disposed of the problem of the state by substituting for it the congress of guilds, an economic body, rid if you please of all political taint as of original sin. This seemed good to contemplate until some inquiring mind suggested that the guildsmen might fall out among themselves and there would be no superior body to hold the contending nation together. That was a disconcerting thought.

English ingenuity was equal to the emergency. Mr. Cole offered as the remedy a dual system: the guild congress representing organized producers grouped in their several crafts and the state, purified of course, speaking for the consumers—the two agencies meeting sometimes in joint session and becoming the ultimate national sovereignty. Thereupon the mentally agile began to toss forward and backward the question of divided sovereignty, raising doubts as to the soundness of Mr. Cole's analysis.

At this juncture Mr. S. G. Hobson, one of the progenitors of the guild movement, takes up the thread of discourse in his book on National Guilds and the State. Apart from some very interesting and informing chapters on the workshop, the civil or professional guilds, the influence of the war on labor, the book is devoted to two vital problems in guild policy. In the first place Mr. Hobson advances to meet the charge that the guilds of producers might very well become closed corporations of exploiters holding consumers at their mercy. His counter argument on this point is that in the new society all will be producers, that profit-making will be eliminated, and

that the guilds will have no motive to engage in profiteering. Thus, he reasons, there cannot be any opposition between producers and consumers, one craft and another. "If," he says, "the element of profit be eliminated and I know that these commodities are at my disposal at cost price, in what other way are our interests opposed?"

That seems a clincher; but the uninitiated may venture one or two questions. Unless we go back to barter and higgling, there will be a medium of exchange; if the members of one guild are paid more per day in that medium of exchange than the members of another guild, then some difference of opinion might very easily arise. For example, I am a member of the teachers' guild and am paid ten shillings a day. Does anyone think I shall be willing to buy shoes made by guildmen paid a guinea a day? Mr. Hobson assures me that I shall buy my shoes at cost; but on walking by the shoe factory I find my dear brethren in the shoe guild "soldiering on the job" or off at a game of cricket. Am I to permit them to add that time to "the mere cost of production"? It is too bad; but really the thing is somewhat complicated, even if one refuses to consider as relative to the future the selfishness of the bone-button makers' guild in old France or the conduct of some of the gentlemen's crafts in America.

As for the state, Mr. Hobson is equally facile in disposing of difficulties. He cuts the knot with one swift, clean, and terrible blow. He knows that a mere union of productive crafts might break down through interne-cine struggles. He says that a class war waged without sense of duty may bring disaster in its train and that "the soviets functioning in the alien sphere of politics, brought the Germans to the gates of Petrograd."

Mr. Hobson, therefore, proposes that there shall be a state in the new guild age; but it is to be the spiritual interpreter of the nation. It is to assume "the spiritual leadership of the nation." It is to be "unhampered and unvitiated by economic interests." "The business of the state is essentially spiritual and whilst it is the formal origin of function, it is itself functionless." To the state are to be assigned such matters as the army and the navy, colonial and foreign affairs, public health and general education, while the production and distribution of wealth are to go to the guilds.

Continental and Americans born west of New England will hardly be able to grasp Mr. Hobson's analysis. The present reviewer, not being a theologian, confesses hopelessness in the presence of it. The army and navy are to be used for "spiritual purposes only"—not to conquer territory or defend oil wells; but suppose that while engaged in a spiritual enterprise the army would have to take possession of material things to keep the spiritual enterprise going, what would happen? Public health is to go to the state. Very well; but public health is, or ought to be, concerned with the prevention of disease, and diseases arise mainly from modes of life and work. Whoever really tackles public health honestly becomes a specialist in housing and industrial hygiene—the business of the guilds concerned. Education of a general character goes to the state in Mr. Hobson's scheme and technical education to the guilds. But experienced teachers tell us that it is utterly impossible to separate general from technical education, particularly in the lower ranges so significant to industrial democracy. Suppose the spiritually-minded state schools, do not teach the multiplication table

what will the draftsmen's guild do about it? Try to conceive of "foreign affairs" and "colonial affairs" with all economic and earthly considerations extracted! Only a theologian can compass that mental task. One might imagine British and German ambassadors affably chatting about the merits of Shakespeare and Goethe or of Holbein and Turner, but why do it?

The trouble with Mr. Hobson and his brethren is that they are looking for exactness where none can exist, for the separation of that which never can be separated. They are modern utopians. They seek finality. Two thousand years after the Greeks and fifty years after Darwin, they speak of "final freedom" (p. 103). Indeed, Mr. Hobson's last chapter is headed "Finally, I believe." "The day of the tyrants draws near."

The truth, the bitter truth is that neither Mr. Hobson, nor the editor of the New York Times, nor very many other people can endure the thought that the world is process not system, movement not finality. No doubt organized economic forces have a great rôle to play in the coming day. Just what that rôle is to be no one can say. When their mission seems clearest, it will be drawing to a close. Those who rode with flying wheel along the Flaminian Road could not foresee Frederick Barbarossa or Andrew Carnegie.

CHARLES A. BEARD.

Men and Steel

Men and Steel, by Mary Heaton Vorse. New York: Boni and Liveright.

THIS book of Mary Vorse's is a thrilling and a perfectly sane and down-on-the-ground contribution to the history of that historic steel strike of last winter. It is a book really of stories—of stories of men and of women and of children and of homes. At the end of the book, when the strike is lost, there is a woman sitting at her door in an alley in the town of Braddock with a child playing at her feet and with a child nestling in her arms. She seems not to see the "red cylinders of the mills." She seems not to note "the sombre magnificence of the smoke." She gazes at "vacancy." She seems to have "the patience of eternity." And she seems to say:

"I have waited. I am eternal. This strife is about me and mine. If my brothers do not change this, my sons will. I can wait."

That last silent scene is a sort of condensation of all the scenes of active expression that come before it. The strike that unrolls itself in this book is not an attack upon Mr. Gary by unionism, but an attack upon him by the homes of people. Mrs. Vorse's quarrel with the towns around Pittsburgh is not their defiance of collective bargaining but their "arrogant indifference to human beings."

Unionism, collective bargaining, industrial democracy, they are means to an end. What is the end? And what is the power that drives to that end? What makes that portentous pageant? The eternal commonplace. The eternal universal groping for security for self, wife, husband, baby. Mrs. Vorse keeps to the groove of living life. She goes through scenes which turn many observers off into distraught inventors of strange new heavens and earths and she maintains the knowledge that sees—and that makes the reader see—the invincible normality of the industrial struggle.