

How Reaction Helps

IS freedom possible only in periods of transition from one economic era to another? Does it flourish only because of the relaxation of old economic ties and endure only as long as the new economic regime is not consolidated? Was the democratic movement, the liberal movement — or whatever name it should go by — not a general and inherently steady development but merely a temporary episode attending the shifting of control from agrarian feudalism to privileged capitalism?

Five years ago such questions seemed absurd to the vast majority of people, especially to middle class people. Today these same questions, though of course in a much less abstract form, are entertained by a steadily increasing number of these same people. The thinking among them have always recognized in a way that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. But they thought this vigilance should be exercised in keeping the ways open, in preventing and removing the obstacles by which losing interests strove to slow down on moving progress. Today they are asking whether the vigilance that secures freedom must not be exercised in altering the conditions which determine the direction of social forces. They are solicitous not about obstructions to democratic progress but about its foundations.

Consideration of the growing change of temper will throw some light on the question of the relation of reactionaryism to social progress. There is a general belief, supposedly justified by history, that in the long run every exhibition of reactionary conservatism (such as we have experienced in America since the 11th of November 1919) ends by strengthening the cause of progress. But the means by which the reactionary helps do not seem to have received analysis. If the technique of the process were known possibly it would cease to be true that nothing is ever learned from history. Certainly it is not instructive to say that a social movement to one extreme always ends by calling out a swing of the pendulum in the other direction, that there are radical as well as conservative reactions. The question is one of specific fact. How does the reactionary release progressive forces?

The question can be answered only by careful historic study guided by knowledge of human psychology. But a hypothesis may be ventured. The reactionary helps by clarifying the issue, by revealing obscure facts, uncovering hidden forces. History

itself gives the lie to the idea that oppression by itself arouses an effective love of liberty. The worst thing about any form of enslavement is that it tends to make the oppressed content in their enslavement. It dulls perception of the possibility of another state of affairs and it destroys the energy which is required to effect change. To apply to the relation of oppression and freedom in politics the physical law of equal action and reaction is to delude ourselves with foolish magical formulae. Reactionarism helps only when it awakens men's minds, only when it makes them see things they didn't see before, only when it focusses attention. The cause of the reactionary depends upon the immense inertia of human stupidity. But the stupidity of the reactionary is that at critical junctures he strives to entrench himself by doing things which force attention to facts that he has every interest in keeping concealed; by doing things which crystalize forces that work in his behalf only as long as they remain diffused and obscure.

The madness with which the gods afflict those whom they would destroy is precisely the temptation to use a temporary possession of strategic power so as to make that power permanent. In this effort they necessarily exaggerate evils that had existed previously but that were tolerated in part because they were not perceptible and in part because they had not as yet become intolerable. The excess, the exaggeration, makes the evil obvious, conspicuous, and it adds force to old and neglected criticism by leading men to believe that the evil had always been there in the same intense form which it assumes under the exaggeration of the moment.

The terms of the peace settlement, for example, are such as to emphasize the desire of Great Britain to obtain a monopoly of oil, and of France to keep Germany in permanent industrial subjection. Such things lie so obviously upon the surface as to convince multitudes of what they never had believed — that the main if not the sole cause of the war was greed for economic supremacy, and that most of the talk about justice and self-determination was bunk. The multitude is in no condition to discriminate. It does not reflect that the outcome of the war exaggerated the significance of certain economic factors, and put a few men in a position where they could make an excessive unrelieved assertion of this exaggeration. The outcome is read back into the antecedent state of things, and it is concluded that these forces were

working in the same intensified fashion all the time.

They were indeed working and working powerfully. But it was a condition of their continued working that they should not be intense and concentrated, but diffused and thus bound up with many genuinely idealistic factors. Their exaggeration condenses, concentrates, crystalizes them, and in so doing strips them bare of all the humane associations which were indispensable to their smooth working. At the same time millions are induced to believe the worst that radical extremists had ever said about the economic determination of society. The reactionary, not the socialistic critic, has supplied the object lesson in the alliance of politics with privileged control of land and its natural resources.

Another way in which the reactionary helps is by the advertising he gratuitously gives radicalism. This enables us to understand why terms given in oburgation and scorn become the honored names of parties and movements. It is not the fault of American reactionaries that an actual Bolshevism has not been created by them. If conditions had been at all propitious the myth of the extraordinary power and unceasing activity of extreme Reds would have ended in a fact. Where there is such fear, it is only proper that there should be something to be afraid of. As it is, the effort to render everything that departs from laudatory acceptance of existing capitalism into a dangerous and sinister radicalism can only terminate in making radicalism respectable and honorable. Men of honesty and spirit who are at all dissatisfied with the existing regime will be ashamed of calling themselves anything else. Already there are signs that liberalism will be eschewed as a milk and water term. At the close of every vehement reactionary movement in history, the commonplaces of thought and discussion which form the plane of action have moved to the left. Vice is not the only thing that becomes tolerable through familiarity. If the reactionary were wise he would show confidence in his strength by leaving the ideas he dislikes in a region of vague and unmentionable mystery. Too much ghost talk creates a desire to see ghosts, until finally the men are willing to pay good money to see the spirits which had once been the source of panicky terrors.

The reactionary also serves by forcing the radical to abandon the cloudland of dreams and come to closer grip with realities. As long as "scientific" socialism lived upon the revolutionary formulae of '48 it was either 75 years behind or ahead of the times. It certainly was not in touch with them in America. But when the Hessians of re-

actionary capitalism discovered these rhetorical flourishes and took them seriously enough to send men to jail for indulging in them, it was a signal that it was no longer necessary to take refuge in millennial dreams. The current facts of particular economic transformation were substituted for prophetic hopes of a universal transformation. Dream psychology is always evidence of impotence. But the dreamer who is prodded into wakefulness faces the facts that enter into action.

For the violence of the reactionary shows prescience of actual tendencies. It reveals the movement of actual forces. As long as socialism accepted the Marxian doctrine of a sudden revolution which was to be the result of the universal misery, poverty and weakness of the laborer, it was practically negligible. Every such doctrine expresses a compensatory psychology. It is the proof of weakness. Any real "revolution" will proceed from strength, from increased strength of capacity and position. The war gave labor precisely this access of strength. Yet it might, in the United States at least, have remained largely unconscious and unconcentrated, ready to be dissipated with the inevitable oncoming of hard times and unemployment, if the reactionary had not forced its recognition. His irrational violence of fear revealed the strength that was there. Labor can never entirely forget the instruction it has received as to its potential power. It is the reactionary who has turned prophet, and his prophecy is based on a frightened perception of the actual movement of forces. Thus he helps. He spreads enlightenment by his endeavors to establish obscurantism. There is just one passing period in which he succeeds. There is a stage of development in which a vague and mysterious feeling of uncertain terror seizes the populace. During this time the reactionary has things all his own way. Deceived by this success, his movements become noisy; his intentions obvious. He attracts attention away from the terror to himself. The twilight clears and objects are again seen in their natural proportions. Discussion and free speech are suppressed. But the means taken to suppress them become more enlightening than normal discussion and free speech would have been. Timid souls have been cowed into a permanent acquiescence; but they never counted anyway except as a passive weight. Suppression of truth and circulation of lies permanently twisted some facts. But the loss as far as progress is concerned is more than made up for by the revelation of motives and objects through which the reactionary permanently weakened his power. Thus he helps.

JOHN DEWEY.

The American Theatre

A History of the Theatre in America, From Its Beginnings to the Present Time, by Arthur Hornblow, 2 volumes, New York: J. B. Lippincott.

THE rather sensational auction sale last October of the books and pamphlets relating to the theatre, which had been accumulated by the late Evarts Wendell, was a surprise to many on account of the number of American plays included and the variety of books, several hundred in all, relating to the history of the American stage. General students of literature have known nothing about this field, because it is ignored in school and college curricula; and special enthusiasts of the stage and drama have been conscious of little except the earlier periods—Dunlap in genial error and Seilhamer in caustic correction—and the present, with its commingling of invective at the commercial theatre and its speculative hopefulness for a new stage, and drama, and playgoing public.

Of the general historians of American literature none but Moses Coit Tyler has paid any attention to playwright, actor or producer. There is no word about them in the substantial volumes by Richardson and Wendell, none in the ordinary run of textbooks, and not a mention of them even in the four-hundred and odd pages of Pattee's American Literature since 1870. Yet there is work for a lifetime on the American drama and the American theatre, and, either in the raw or half-refined, an immense amount of material available.

The appearance, therefore, of a compendious history on this subject is very much to the point; the first general survey has now been attempted; a modest observatory has been erected from which the intelligent sightseer can look out over the field; a beginning has been made. However, an observatory is perhaps too substantial for a faithful likeness to Mr. Hornblow's volumes; a captive balloon would be a better metaphor; for the captive balloon, I am told, has three kinds of motion,—pitching, spinning and rolling,—and is a profitable seat of observation only to the man with a steady nerve and a trained eye.

The work in hand is similarly blown about by various winds, so that one is never sure from chapter to chapter as to the altitude or angle from which he is looking down at the field. Nearly half the work is devoted to the history of events up to 1825. The period is full of interest, but it is after all like the formative period in the life of any author, and should be treated so, as to both emphasis and proportion. But the proportion throughout the work seems to have been determined largely by the abundance of material at hand. At one point Seilhamer presents a vast amount of documentation as to casts of early plays, and it is included; at another William B. Wood indulges in circumstantial reminiscence about the social bad manners of George Frederick Cooke, and three pages are devoted to one episode; at another the escapades of Lola Montez attract the historian's attention, and a page and a half are dedicated to her, of which only six lines have anything to do with her relation to the American theatre. Again, as the balloon has cavorted in mid-air the pilot has sacrificed accuracy to the need of clinging to the sides of the basket. For example, President Dwight of Yale did not declare anything about the stage in 1824 because he was then seven years dead; the poet Whittier's first name (one hates to quibble) was John, and not William; Dunlap's translation from Zschokke is spelled Abaellino; and the whole point of the Wilde title, The Importance of Be-

ing Ernest, lies in the proper spelling of the punning last word. Finally, as these latter items suggest, the work is deficient at points where publisher should share responsibility with author. Yet, as has already been said, the book is a pioneer work, and is entitled to the respect due its kind. First works in untrodden fields are seldom unqualifiedly successful.

Seen as a whole the history of the theatre in America presents a moving pageant of the most fascinating sort. It is the old story of the cultural history of America reconfirmed in these particular terms. The first unit tells the story of a slowly decreasing dependency on all things English. This involves the presentation of English plays by American amateurs in regular audience rooms with improvised stages; next the development of semi-professional and wholly professional companies who played short seasons at irregular intervals; next the erection of special playhouses; and, finally the formation of more permanent professional companies—both English and American—all of which took place in the course of two generations or more before the emergence of any American drama.

Throughout these developments a prevailing inhospitality to things theatrical had to be worn down. In New York and Philadelphia the indirections of the politicians combined with the head-on animosity; and, of course, the conquest of New England was a problem in itself. The early counsel of Samuel Sewall, that Boston colossus, pillar of the church and supporter of the law, had been sounded in 1714. The Council Chamber in Boston should not be used as a playhouse: "Christian Boston" should not "goe beyond Heathen Rome in the practice of Shameful Vanities." Evidently the counsel prevailed; yet old truepenny ghost of the drama would not meekly submit to banishment. The Massachusetts General Court showed that he was still active underground in 1750, by its act for "preventing and avoiding the many great mischiefs which arise from public stage plays, interludes, and other theatrical entertainments, which not only occasion great and unnecessary expenses, and discourage industry and frugality, but likewise tend generally to increase immorality, impiety and a contempt for religion." And while Massachusetts was, to use its own diction, getting its dander up, the ungodly Rhode Island, Puritan influenced, but not Puritan bound, in a temporary burst of worldliness, built a theatre, sanctioned professional players, and contributed to dramatic humor by inventing the long-used device of the "moral dialogue" subterfuge for eating its cakes and conserving its virtue too.

The Continental Congress war measure of 1774 was colonial rather than Puritan, but quaintly indicative of things dramatic with its classification of exhibitions of shows and plays with "horse-racing and all kinds of gaming [and] cock-fighting"; but the petition to the General Court in 1790 is to the point, as is the referendum vote of the next year, and the successful conclusion of the campaign in 1783.

The yoking of plays and cock-fighting does not seem quite so bizarre if one recalls the proprietary attitude of the public toward theatres and actors on both sides of the Atlantic in the good old days. Garrick pelted out of his theatre and pursued to his house for an unwelcome change of bill, the "Old Price" uproars let loose and continued for three months at Covent Garden Theatre, and the mad behavior of the London pits and galleries, gave ample precedents for high times in the American playhouses; and the precedents were followed. In 1800 Mrs. Byrne, ap-