

The New Republic Idea

by HERBERT CROLY

THE group of men who founded the New Republic in 1914 had a definite conception in their heads of the kind of periodical which they proposed to publish. We called it a journal of opinion. Its object was less to inform or entertain its readers than to start little insurrections in the realm of their convictions. Opinions are the currency by which the citizens of a democracy exchange spiritual values. But just because they pass through many hands, serve so many doubtful purposes, and are accepted at their face value by indiscriminating tradesmen, they tend to become dull, shop-worn and even debased. We hoped to do something towards brightening the coinage of American opinion, sharpening the edges of its design and helping its purveyors to buy five dollars worth for five dollars. We wished to prick or even goad public opinion into being more vigilant and hospitable, into considering its convictions more carefully and into attaching to them a higher intrinsic value.

In so far as their journal could succeed in becoming a ferment in American opinion, the founders of the New Republic thought they would perform a patriotic service. The American commonwealth, more than any other modern state, originated in an idea. Its fundamental law was framed as the embodiment of a truth. It has always de-

pendent and still depends for its integrity on vitality of conviction among its citizens. Its government was not an undesigned historical accident which subsequently received a philosophic or religious justification. Its founders had acted in the light of a group of principles which they and their successors took to be a valid formulation of the political and social conditions of human fulfillment. Americans have never forgotten that their commonwealth was the embodiment of a truth, but they have, particularly of late years, behaved as if the way to keep patriotic truths alive was to remember them conscientiously, to repeat them sedulously and to praise them indiscriminately. This, we thought, was a dangerous mistake. If the American nation was to develop without disorder or violence from its ideal beginnings, its consciousness must keep possession of the national fund of truth, not by memorizing and repeating it, but by bringing it down to date and renewing it.

The disposition to vindicate the ideal content of Americansim chiefly by repeating trite phrases and by preserving, substantially intact, seedy traditions and institutions was coming to dominate all kinds of American opinion. It was not merely a theory of the philosophers and lawyers. It had infected the state of mind of the ordinary American. He considered himself the member of a chosen people whose perpetual success was guaranteed by Manifest Destiny. He took for granted the permanent serviceability of the traditions and the institutions under which he and his fellows had attained prosperity. He resented any disposition seriously to challenge them; and he attached to sceptics and critics the stigma of being un-American.

Thus Americanism itself finally became popularly confused with a combination of optimism, fatalism and conservatism; and the confusion necessitated the reformation of American political conviction as one condition of the continued success of our country in practising the art of

self-government. Prevailing public opinion did not understand that, owing to the practical extinction of pioneer conditions, and the increasing concentration of economic power, and the corresponding centralization of political power the American democracy had drifted into dangerous waters. It was, indeed, perverted enough actually to consecrate as peculiarly American a policy of drift. It expected by virtue of Manifest Destiny to move and to keep on moving in the direction of national fulfillment, yet without doing anything to renew the truth with which the nation had started or modify its application. If American life, in spite of the Constitution or because of it, was drifting into dangerous waters, it was extremely desirable, not only to arouse American public opinion to a knowledge of what the dangers were but to explain and popularize a different and a sounder interpretation of the truth which the American commonwealth had originally embodied.

This original fund of truth had consisted at bottom of a vision of the latent goodness and regeneracy of human nature—a goodness which would surely come to the surface if only society would permit to the ordinary man and woman a fair and full chance of self-expression. The way to give them a fair chance was to guarantee to them civil and political liberty, the opportunity of work and the right to enjoy its fruits and a sufficient measure of education. This truth is clearly an imaginative affirmation rather than a finished formula or a particular body of law. It is a constructive faith in the possibilities of human nature, a vision of individual and social development of which the traditions and the institutions of the country would be merely the temporary and occasional instruments. It would depend for its realization upon the success of the American nation, after the land was settled and the natural resources appropriated, in maintaining a wide distribution among the people of economic opportunity and responsibility and

some kind of liberating education. The truth of such an ideal obviously could not be taken for granted. It was a growing truth, confident in its affirmation but flexible in its method, which obtained immediate reality only from novel and specific applications. Its renewed vitality depended on the fresh impulse, knowledge, thought and invention which the American mind could bring to the business of using the changing materials of industry, politics and social life for the benefit of a better fulfillment of human beings.

II

TWO months before the first issue of the New Republic was published, the Great War began, and its startling intrusion transformed the nature and emphasis of the little insurrection which its editors wished to start in American public opinion. But the advent of the war only confirmed the misgivings about the Manifest Destiny of the United States which prompted its foundation. Not America only but the whole civilized world was, it was only too clear, drifting into dangerous waters. The structure of western civilization had not been subjected to such a grave peril since the religious wars, perhaps not since the barbarian invasions. The peril did not arise from accidental, easily distinguishable and obviously guilty sources, but from sources which are themselves characteristic of the society which they are undermining and in some form indispensable to it—from a science which multiplies machinery much more than it illuminates human nature, from an industry which saves so much human labor and wastes so much human life, from a technology which, while prodigiously productive, is still too sterile to cultivate craftsmanship and creative work, from a nationalism which is opposed to imperialism but which insists itself on being pettily imperialistic, from a liberty which, in spite of so many proofs of its constructive possibilities, remains consciously negative and unedifying, and from a toleration which, in so far as it has ceased to

depend on coercion to produce conviction, has ceased to believe sufficiently in its own gods. These are the new growths which modern civilization has stimulated and they threaten by their luxuriance to impoverish its roots and trunk. Mankind has enormously increased its ability to satisfy its specific wants. The completer satisfaction of specific wants has resulted in an orgy of specialization and in the capture of the human imagination by a wholly secular polytheism. The new gods are headstrong. Their impulses are at once so irresistible and so anarchic that modern society seems incapable of recovering its self-possession.

In times past when a suffering generation was tortured by conflicts between its members and its whole body, it could without violating its conviction of the truth find consolation for its wounded flesh in the vision of a Divine Order which would in the fullness of time provide compensation for the Faithful. But the modern mind cannot believe in the reality of any such alternative; and this very scepticism accounts in part for the present distraction and confusion. It implies that we can no longer honestly charge up to Fate or Providence our own blunders. For the first time in history the human spirit is the captain and the only possible captain of the ship upon which the human race has embarked. Civilization, such as it is, is contrived by man for the better fulfillment of man's own nature. It will be wrecked by his own wilfulness and ignorance or redeemed by his fidelity and prescience. If his spiritual leaders cannot make up their minds why modern society is so unmanageable, and if they cannot envisage for their fellows some body of political, economic and religious truth which will coordinate human activities without over-ruling human responsibility, then the coming century is sure to be a period of disintegration and frustration.

Yet, as it seems to us, the prospect which this more modest but less subordinate attitude towards the world

brings with it, so far from being depressing, will in the end exhilarate and fortify the human spirit. It will have renounced the doubtful pretension of exercising through the conceptions of Providence or Fate of Natural Law a vicarious overlordship of the Universe, but by virtue of this renunciation it has removed an insuperable obstacle to the exercise by itself of the captaincy of its own journey towards individual and associated fulfillment. As long as it could shift the responsibility for its infirmities, blunders and obscurantism to the shoulders of some imperative Mystery or Order in the real world, it lacked any sufficient reason to fasten its attention on the disorder in its own house. It never surrendered itself to the vocation of undertaking with its hands to make its house bright, clean and sweet. But in so far as it has sincerely renounced these consoling yet none the less disabling illusions about its subordination to an anthropomorphic and imperative universe, it has freed itself for a task which it is fitted to perform. It can begin disinterestedly and whole-heartedly to learn enough about its nature to obtain a greater mastery of its own conduct and imagination. Grim and terrible as the immediate outlook may be (and grim and terrible it surely is) there never was a time in the history of our race when human beings had better reason to walk upright and fearless and to fasten their attention with more confidence on their ability to fashion a symbolic coherent meaning for human life, analogous to the imperative meaning which they have imputed to the Universe, but more liberating and coordinating.

III

IF there is any truth in the foregoing interpretation of the existing breach in civilization, it brings us back to a still more emphatic assertion of the necessity of fermenting American public as the precise and indispensable con-

dition of keeping the Republic true to its original allegiance. The American intelligence, although it took over from its European ancestry the tradition of a Providence or Law which gave unity to the known world at the expense of the subjection of human life to a Divine imperialism, had nevertheless actually started the transition to humanism. The founders of that Republic proposed for the first time in history the development of a society which was interested chiefly in giving human beings during their life in this world a better chance of fulfillment; and that is the kind of society which the modern spirit, if it is to pull civilization through and beyond its existing predicament, must dedicate itself to discovering and arranging.

The American nation has not, it is true, kept faith with its original ideal of the United States as a Promised Land. Its prevailing public opinion, as we have already remarked, interpreted the national Promise as something which was being automatically achieved and which for that reason bestowed a Providential consecration on its existing political and social organization and on the popular patterns of conduct. But this false interpretation was the natural result of an over-dose of success, and now that the success is more precarious and the drift is in a palpably dangerous direction, American public opinion is becoming sufficiently chastened to take stock of what its spiritual possessions really are. It is not as yet repentant and enlightened, but it is apprehensive and confused. It has abandoned its former complacency. The slogan of Manifest Destiny instead of resting on a hearty affirmation by the mass of the people has degenerated into the sinister propagandum of an interested class.

In the United States, as in the rest of the world, public opinion hesitates about accepting a new conception of its responsibilities and functions. It is bracing itself to be-

come the deliberate and inveterate agent of individual and national adjustment. The Great War destroyed some things that were bad as well as many that were good. It has undermined the prestige and discredited the profession of dogmatic conservatism. No well-informed person can plausibly impute responsibility for the misfortunes and predicaments of the European and American peoples to any protesting class or group in the community. The old ruling classes are clearly responsible. They recognize their responsibility not expressly and candidly but indirectly and by implication. Their self-confidence is shaken. When the conservative Prime Minister of Great Britain describes the political and economic condition of Europe as chaotic, he is using a word which condemns dogmatic conservatism as ridiculous. Not even a divinely inspired government can bring order out of chaos by opposition to change, by the glorification or the sanctification of existing institutions. In a chaotic world the way to vindicate order is to undertake radical reform. The only possible order is a new order.

At the present moment chaos is not as triumphant in the United States as in Europe. The American Republic was born under happier conditions than the European states and at a more fortunate moment. Its political organization incarnates the comparatively humane political ideals of a unionism which is supposed to guarantee liberty and a federalism which rebels against the compulsion of centralization. For this reason it is escaping in part the consequences of the nationalist separatism which is the immediate cause of so much damage in Europe. Its comparative immunity is, however, superficial and far from secure. If European civilization is really imperilled, its peril derives, as we have already intimated, from causes more fundamental than factious nationalism. These apparently irreconcilable national dissensions are symptoms

of a moral culture which usually invokes impatient, cowardly or violent methods of dealing with conflicts. Whenever it cannot compromise or evade them, it falls back on coercion to overcome them. It knows no other ultimate way. What it means by an ultimatum is a finality with compulsion as the only alternative. It is this ultimate dependence on compulsion to overcome conflict which renders modern civilization so impotent to deal constructively with the powerful centrifugal tendencies which the polytheism of modern scientific specialism has created.

There is, I think, a clear connection in the culture of modern Christendom between the disposition to overcome conflict by coercion and the disposition to envisage the Universe as the irresistible incarnation of a knowable or unknowable Order. A universe of this kind can triumph over its insubordinate ingredients or aspects only by falling back on a sublimated ultimatum, and if spiritual leadership feels justified in subduing the fact of conflict by the symbol of a Divine imperialism, it is mentally prepared to justify the solution of specific conflicts by actual compulsion. On the other hand if we conceive the human spirit itself as the only captain which the bark of civilization will have, there can be no similar justification either for coercion or for the moral pugnacity which naturally accompanies it. The conflicts are assumed to be real, but with a kind of reality which is not equivalent to ultimacy and does not require an ultimate sanction for their solution. In so far as they are real, their reality would re-appear in some form even after a forcible attempt to suppress it. The only final solution of such conflicts is to let them fight out their differences but in the light of complete publicity and subject to the test of a sharp cross-examination of the motives and objects of the contending parties. Under such conditions an adjustment would finally appear. The very renunciation of coercion implies the consent of both

parties to accept finally the only possible substitute for coercion which is an agreement upon some common standard of positive human values. At present the chief obstacle to the solution of conflicts by specific adjustment is the disposition of the conflicting interests to insist upon the ultimate righteousness of their motives and objects; and it is this morally pugnacious disposition which has to be undermined. It is incompatible with the modesty, the flexibility and the hospitality of humanism. It forbids an honest experiment in the direction of realistic coordination of the special activities and interests of mankind.

The American nation is as much possessed by a pugnacious psychology and the disposition to overcome conflicts by coercion as are the European nations. Europe and America owe allegiance to the same cultural kingdom; and if the body of civilization is quarrelling with its members, and if the violence of the quarrel is threatening the integrity and safety of modern society, American immunity from European disaster will soon come to an end. It was this cultural blood-brotherhood which forced the American people to line up on one side in the Great War in spite of their conscious disposition to stay out. Considering the lack of any satisfactory positive moral alternative to war and the many strong strands of their cultural bond with Europe, they could not stay out without exposing themselves shivering and naked to a desolating wind of moral condemnation. The same common allegiances will force the American people, geographically isolated though they be, to share the fate of the European peoples.

But just as we Americans have some advantage over Europe in our immediate circumstances, so we have some advantage in our cultural tradition. American federalism—the original American attempt to break up the conception of a unanimous imperial sovereignty much as the Nicene Creed broke up the conception of an essentially

unanimous God—was the first faint political symptom of an emerging humanistic culture. Such a culture was implicit in the primitive American faith in the latent goodness and regeneracy of human nature. The latent regeneracy of human nature is, indeed, its central constructive affirmation. The American intelligence has done very little to give reality to this affirmation. Its attention has been concentrated on the task of settling a continent and appropriating its economic opportunities. It deserted its primitive gods or allowed them to freeze into inhuman images which demanded the traditional sacrifice of human life for the glorification and perpetuation of their own eminence. But the humanistic affirmation remains implicit in a few American institutions and traditions and the American spirit has never lost some measure of affiliation with it. Americans can look forward to the future interpretation of their national life as the expression of a humanistic ideal with more assurance and with a better chance of carrying on than their European fellow-workers. They will be weaving into the ground of the American flag an image of troubled but deserving and coming humanity which, in spite of much corruption and infidelity, remains congenial to the amiable innocence of their souls.

The program of reform by which they may hope to renew the original vision of the American commonwealth as the Promised Land for the ordinary man and woman, difficult and obscure as it may be in concrete application, is not obscure in its large masses and outlines. Its approach is economic. The operation of economic processes is steadily depriving too many Americans of the opportunity of labor upon which they could formerly count and of the enjoyment of the fruits of their own labor. Year by year the proportion of the American people who work in agriculture and industry and who do not and have no reason to consent to the existing methods of producing and dis-

tributing wealth are increasing. They feel themselves chained to an economic machine which is grinding their lives smaller, which they cannot control and which their masters either cannot or will not control. The danger is that they will finally revolt and destroy the machine without much regard to the effect of their destructive work upon their own welfare or that of society. This is a serious danger. It is rapidly becoming an imminent danger. It is the most ominous of the conflicts which are threatening the future of civilization. Yet it is a danger against which democratic political and cultural ideals should and can protect American society.

There is no way of evading or merely compromising this conflict. The ordinary American citizen who works with his hands, and many of them who are supposed to work with their brains for a living, are not getting a fair chance. The existing economic institutions of society are responsible for the default. It is extremely difficult to remedy the default, and there is every reason for attacking the problem with consideration and caution; but somehow it must be attacked. The people now responsible for the political and business management of the country are evading it. They are standing pat, or they are making a great parade and noise about insignificant and futile concessions. There is just one way to shock their complacency. The disfranchised majority must take advantage of their numbers and reach in the direction of all the economic and political power that they can. They will not use the power wisely after they seize it, but they cannot move along without it. Unless they possess it, they will never stimulate the lethargic and complacent people who operate the industrial and political mechanism to pay attention to their grievances.

But, of course, the increased power of labor unions and labor political parties is only a preliminary and (be it ad-

mitted) hazardous step. Both parties to a fundamental conflict, just in so far as they possess power, tend to be impatient, apprehensive and headstrong. Steeped as they still are in the conception of righteous compulsion, they are disposed to realize their own objects when they can by legal or illegal force, and to that end they seek to disqualify their opponents by attaching to them the stigma of being wicked, greedy or congenitally inferior and unregenerate people. If this disposition continues the result is certain to be a violent class warfare in which the victory of either side would be more or less disastrous. The result of the victory would be to suppress not to solve the conflict, and probably a long period of misery, poverty and oppression would follow. Succeeding generations would have to destroy the results of the victory before they could again tackle the job of giving to the plain man the opportunity to work, the stimulus to work well and the ability and the disposition to use his labor and its fruits for the unfolding of his own life.

Thus while the present constitution of society, with its ultimate reliance on force rather than consent, renders a dangerous conflict of this kind necessary and even desirable, it is no less necessary that American society should brace itself to avoid being impoverished by a dose of such drastic medicine. There is no reason why it should be impoverished provided it remains faithful to the essentially democratic practice of submitting all such conflicts to full and fair discussion. Discussion which is full and fair will break up the unmanageable class conflict into minor specific manageable conflicts. It will enable public opinion to discriminate between those aspects of the existing capitalist institutions which work well, and those which are not working well, and it may prepare public opinion to deal remedially because drastically with its serious defaults. Discussion of this kind does not necessarily provide a remedy. It did

not in the case of the anti-slavery conflict in this country. But it always absorbs a large part of the shock of the conflict; and in so far as it is fair and full its educational value is incalculable.

If discussion is to amount to more than a shock-absorber, it needs to be transfigured by a common conviction of the latent regeneracy and brotherhood of mankind. Only in an atmosphere provided by such a conviction will these deep class conflicts be fought out and ventilated until a constructive solution is reached. The contending parties will remain contentious in spirit, peremptory in their claims and coercive in their final methods unless they share with their opponents an affirmation of the latent possibilities of human nature and a willingness to test all programs, demands, privileges, institutions and traditions by their ability to contribute to the unfolding of these possibilities. Such an affirmation is, of course, essentially religious. It means the worship of a God symbolized not as Power, but as Understanding and Love.

Such is the idea which underlies the work of the New Republic. It is an idea whose vitality depends upon the maintenance of an extremely delicate balance between being specific and being general, between being aggressive and being conciliatory and between being practical and being visionary. The effort to embody it in the consecutive weekly issues of a journal cannot be more than occasionally successful. Even if it were not difficult to carry on a weekly like the New Republic, weekly publications with limited circulations are, of course, pitifully inadequate spokesmen of so vast and pretentious an idea. Its only sufficient spokesmen are the schools and the churches. But the schools and the churches are not aroused either to the grave existing danger to civilization or to their own opportunity and function. Some time soon they will wake up. Until that time comes very little may help. Even an insignificant weekly can do something to keep faith alive in those members of the community who believe in the power of the truth to set men free.