

**OUTLOOKS FROM
THE NEW
STANDPOINT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649276141

Outlooks from the new standpoint by E. Belfort Bax

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E. BELFORT BAX

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FROM THE NEW STANDPOINT

Ernest BY
E. BELFORT BAX

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STORY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION," "JEAN PAUL MARAT," "HAND-
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SECOND



EDITION

11125-6
1915/11

LONDON
SWAN SONNENSCHNEIN & CO.
NEW YORK: CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1893

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PREFACE.

THE present volume consists of various pieces on a somewhat wide range of subjects, but all of them having, as I believe, a common bearing. Some of them have never been published before, while others which have appeared have been largely re-written. The first part of the volume is taken up with two historical essays. The one on Anacharsis Clootz is based mainly on the exhaustive "Life of Clootz," by Georges Avenel, a most remarkable contribution toward the inner history of the French Revolution, which, so far as I am aware, has never before been noticed in this country. The second part contains a collection of papers all bearing more or less directly upon Socialism, while the third part is devoted to three philosophical papers.

The inner steady break-up of the fabric of bourgeois civilisation becomes more noticeable year by year. The economic side of this collapse, as exemplified in the unceasing labour-struggle—the absorbing topic of interest in all circles—is already beginning to directly modify political conditions. The decisive question in all elections now is the labour question. If politics has to desert its old party aries, and give itself the semblance of a social or labour content, not less so has religion. The Christian churches, their old specula-

tive content dead and explained away, take to advocating social reforms, or nostrums, as the case may be, in the name of "true Christianity." That remarkable and protean *ignis fatuus*, "true Christianity," is now engaged in putting off the "old Adam" of personal holiness, spiritual regeneration, and preparation for another world, and taking to schemes for "ameliorating the condition of the masses," etc. Again, the present form of the institution of marriage has received some severe blows of late. The safety-valve (from the point of view of conventional marriage) of free divorce, recently opened in most continental countries, having been religiously sat upon by the English *bourgeois*, we may reasonably hope that in Britain the principle by which the clumsy mechanical compulsion of law intrudes itself into the purely personal relations of life will first receive its decisive death-blow.

The current popularity of Utopian romances, hailed with such joy by some, is not, perhaps, a very edifying sign. It indicates a demand for miracles, on the sou of which, unfortunately, the quack and the impostor readily flourish. For it would be nothing less than a miracle for any human being to describe in prophetic vision the society of the future. What is effected in Utopian socialist writings is merely a travesty of the society of the present, or of the past. We can *define*, that is, lay down, in the abstract, the general principles on which the society of the future will be based, but we cannot *describe*, that is, picture, in the concrete, any state of society of which the world has had no experience. For into the *reality* of a society, even in its broader details, there enters a large

element of contingency, of alogicality, of unreason, with which no general principles will furnish us. In consequence of this, the detail, the *reality*, has to be supplied by the Utopian romancer, from states of society already realised in the past or the present. The new principles are then superimposed upon a basis already formed of old principles, and a hybrid pseudo-reality is produced, which is neither past, present, nor future. When we ourselves are part and parcel of a social state, when we ourselves are a portion of the reality of a given society, bathed in its categories and inhaling its atmosphere, our imagination cannot transcend it to any appreciable extent, if at all. Our logical faculty can, indeed, as it were, dissolve the present social reality for abstract thought, and show the lines on which the new principle growing up within it is going, but our imagination is quite incapable of envisaging the future social reality in its completed shape. We can just as little conceive how the men of the future will envisage our civilisation of to-day—how they will represent to themselves our thoughts and feelings, aspirations and antipathies—for when all this social life has become objective, with its categories stiff and lifeless, it will be seen in its true proportions and significance. To illustrate the truth of the foregoing, we have only to recall the impossibility the modern man finds in freeing himself from the illusion of Pessimism, the outcome of which is the Cynicism proper to the superior person of century-end “culture.” Our intellectual insight, which tells us that this, too, must pass, as surely as the pessimism of the decaying classi-

cal world passed, or as the optimism of the eighteenth century has passed, that it is a mere mood bred of a mephitic social atmosphere, generated in its turn by the rank overgrowth of an effete civilisation—this intellectual insight may, I say, preserve us from the priggish and ostentatious cynicism of the superior person, but it does not free us from the oppression now and again of the *feeling* (embodied in all modern literature and art) that the world has grown old—that for humanity, *das Lied ist aus*. This feeling we can just as little rid ourselves of, because we know it has no basis, except in ourselves, than we can rid ourselves of the optical illusion that the sun is moving, because we know that the earth, and not the sun, moves.

The author hopes, in conclusion, that the present volume may stimulate the thought of some in certain directions, as he has reason to believe its predecessors have, in some slight degree, been instrumental in doing.

E. B. B.