

GREAT BRITAIN AFTER THE WAR

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Great Britain After the War by Sidney Webb & Arnold Freeman

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INTRODUCTION.

A century ago the "Servile State" was no comic figment, but a reality. The mass of the people of Great Britain were dependent upon the demands or the whims of the capitalist, to a degree almost incredible in these days, for their means of life and for their manner of living. And as a matter of fact, this dependence meant for the bulk of the population a condition of squalor, wretchedness and degradation from which the ordinary working-man of to-day would shrink as from a living death. Parliamentary representation was the monopoly of a handful of privileged personages; nine-tenths of the population could neither read newspapers nor use a pen; even the elementary human right of combination to resist the enslavement effected by abnormally long hours, low wages and deplorable conditions of employment, was, by law, denied to the workers.

If we take this for our point of comparison, the elevation of the Standard of Comfort and the growth of freedom during the hundred years between the close of the war with France and the opening of the war with Germany have been nothing short of extraordinary. It is true that the text-books can still characterise our industrial régime as "capitalistic" and "individualist"; true, also, that the financier, the company-director and the trust magnate are in some ways more effectually the real kings of British industry than were their fore-runners of the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. But it is no longer true that the mass of the people are at the mercy of capitalism for their bread and butter, their conditions of employment, their health, their leisure, their thinking and their very honour, as it might legitimately be said that they were a century ago. Trade Unionism—criminal during the first quarter of the century, lawfully embracing 4,000,000 members in 1914—had succeeded, before war broke out, in freeing great sections of the workers, as regards hours, wages and conditions of employment, from their former absolute dependence upon the employer's fiat. The Co-operative Movement—growing from 28 members in 1844 to more than three millions in 1915—has enabled nearly a quarter of the whole population to supply itself, free from capitalist profit, with the bulk of the commodities which the workers' households daily need. Supplementing the action of Collective

Bargaining, the State had already before the war put the force of law behind a prodigiously elaborate series of Common Rules, in the form of statutory minima designed to protect in varying ways and degrees the bulk of the citizen-producers from the more extreme pressures of private employment, to such an extent that the fixing of minimum wages, maximum hours, adequate conditions of sanitation and safety, etc., have come more and more to be looked upon as basic safeguards on which it is for the community as a whole to insist. Supplementing, on the other hand, the beneficent activities of the democratic Co-operative Stores and Wholesale Societies, the National and Municipal Government has become, in the aggregate, the most extensive direct provider of things that the community needs, whether housing, education, medical service, sanitation, water, light, sick pay, accident insurance, superannuation allowances, roads and bridges, means of communication, trams, parks, entertainments, libraries, labour exchanges—even, in particular cases, clothing, milk and meals!

So overwhelming and irresistible have these newer "collectivist" tendencies, whether governmental or co-operative, become in recent years that it had come to seem almost inevitable that the mastery of the future would lie with them rather than with those which are individualist and competitive. Hardly any well-informed student of the history of the last century, noting the steady subordination of private to public interests in the means of life, and the concurrent emergence of the mass of the people into relative comfort, culture and freedom, could fail—before the war—to take an optimistic view of the future of Democracy in Great Britain. Reflecting in the early summer of 1914 (let us say) upon probable further developments, such an observer would have looked forward with some confidence to a continuance of that progress in economic emancipation which we are now realising to be the necessary corollary of political democracy; to the gradual securing to every member of the community, as a necessary basis for individual development, of as high a "minimum" in the Standard of Life as the bounty of Nature and the productive energies of the community would permit; to the winning for every individual of a "maximum of freedom" of self-expansion, limited no longer by a heritage of individual poverty, but only the bounds set by social resources; to a steady progress in the acquisition for communal utilisation of all those forms of "economic rent," whether accruing from Land, Capital or "Superior Brains" which have long been public in their nature in the eyes of our economic treatises and

our Bibles, though not in our property law; and to the eventual culmination of these tendencies, however far off might have seemed the goal, in that "equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labour"—involving not a pedantic identity, either qualitative or quantitative, but an essential parity of economic scope—which John Stuart Mill in his day and George Bernard Shaw in our own have declared to be the only practicable economic condition in which an educated Democracy can finally acquiesce.

What the student has now to think about is the probable effect of the Great War upon the stream of tendencies that seemed to be carrying us forward to some such future as the above. The immediate effects of the war are familiar to us. It has certainly weakened Trade Unionism; it has enlarged and perhaps strengthened the Co-operative Movement. It has given the State, in its rôle of armed defender of our civilisation, controls and ownerships such as to make even the Socialists stare. In the following pages, however, we are concerned with those "primary reactions" of the war only in so far as they enable the student to apprehend and estimate the secondary, larger and more lasting, consequences that will not all be easily discoverable even when peace is established—many of them, perhaps, not until after many years of unrest, reconstruction and settling down.

What will be the effect of the war upon individualistic capitalism? What grounds are there for the view that the great captain of industry will gain an augmentation of power over his lesser rivals on the one hand, and over his employees on the other? Is it to be expected that as a consequence of the war "Capitalism" and "Individualism" will be so strengthened as to postpone, perhaps for generations, those further triumphs of "Social Democracy" towards which we seemed to be moving? How will the war affect the Trade Union and the Co-operative Movements, immediately, and in the long run? Above all, what part will the community, organised in its multifarious Central Departments and Local Authorities, be prepared to play in the tremendous social drama upon which this war is but the raising of the curtain? How soon will boldly-conceived Reconstruction follow the mere palliation of evils? Is there to be deliberate, purposeful, unapologetic, disinterested public action to make good the ravages of war, or the opportunist, patchy and often sham "social reform" of which in recent years we have had so many illustrations? Will the power of the State be used,

when Peace comes, in the interests of the few or in those of the many? Are we destined, during the first years of dislocation, to witness a period of plutocratic tyranny, manifested both in the regulations of the factory and in the decrees of the Cabinet? Will this be followed by "Labour Governments" and "Socialist Legislation"? Will Great Britain in 1926 or in 1936 be a finer country to live in than it would have been had not the sharp prick of war aroused us from our slothful acquiescence in the social iniquities that persist around us?

There is a sense in which none of the approaching economic problems will be new. Neither war nor peace destroys what economic science can tell us of the facts of social life; nor, unless unthinkable catastrophe overtakes the nation, can there be any complete break of the continuity of its industrial and social development. The first business of the student who would read the riddles of the future is, therefore, to make himself acquainted with what economics has to teach him. Given this knowledge, his task is to apply to new groupings of facts, demonstrated forces and the known tendencies of things. There is perhaps no study at once so fascinating and so tyrannical in the demands that it makes upon the reason and the imagination as this of patiently working out the provisional solutions of problems of which the very formulation must be, as yet, largely speculative. Even the newspaper public is aware that "things will never be the same again"—foreign trade, manufacture, agriculture, the relations of capital and labour, the rôle of the State and that of the Vocational Organisation, the amount and distribution of wealth, the spirit of the people—"everything will be changed." But such negative conclusions are of no use. Of little greater value are the vague generalities which, at any rate when they touch upon economic problems, our literary prophets are content to offer us. It is essential for the constructive thinker to get at some such body of detailed conclusions concerning the probable, or alternatively possible, wage and price movements, trade and unemployment conditions, etc., etc., as will enable him to work out concrete proposals by which Trade Unions, Co-operative Societies, and the Houses of Parliament can effectively anticipate the countless social and industrial difficulties that will form the aftermath of the war.

It is not the business of the following pages to supply the detailed conclusions that are required, to attempt any dogmatic presentation of the march of events, or to put forward specific solutions of the problems that will confront us.