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The challenge to democracy VIII. The machine and democracy

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The Challenge to Democracy

The democratic way of life is being challenged today all over the world. Its superiority is widely denied, and its security is seriously imperiled. The American people consequently are interested in understanding the dangers that confront them and in guarding against them. Democracy needs strengthening both internally and externally, and farm people can and must and will help do the job, both because of their numbers and because they know better than many other groups what it means.

It is the purpose of this series of bulletins to show what produced the present situation and suggest some of the things that need to be done about it—not by farm people alone but by rural America and urban America working together. Eight bulletins are included in the series:

2. John H. Powell—The Citizen and the Power to Govern.
3. L. B. Schmidt—The Family Farm in the Machine Age.
4. V. Alton Moody—The Test of Citizenship.
7. H. C. Cook—Improving Public Administration.
The Challenge to Democracy

VIII. The Machine and Democracy

By Charles H. Norby

INDUSTRIALISM AND WORLD POLITICS

The subject of modern industrialism presents itself as an especially significant subject to explore in connection with the many-sided challenge to democracy inasmuch as it is the peculiar dominating force in the economic life of our time. Travel to Europe or to Asia or to the uttermost parts of the earth and you will discover that if not the belching smokestacks of the factory then at least mechanical implements and other products of the factory are in use among the people for their happiness or their misery. It is here in the complicated realm of material necessities and of wealth, the realm of economic life, that the strongest mainsprings of human action lie, and it is in economic disorder that the gravest political disorders of our society are generated.

It is in this quarter that one may expect to find the deeper origins of war and political catastrophe, of the revolutionary tendencies at large in the world today—the rapid change from the trend toward democracy which stands out in the pages of nineteenth and early twentieth century history to a trend toward despotism, the outright elevation of hatred and inhumanity to the ranks of human virtues, the conversion of falsification and deceit into a legitimate useful science, and all the transformations that are part and parcel of what is thus far a triumphant Nazi movement. It is in this quarter that one may expect to find and analyze and devise counteraction for the sources of upheaval that are in the fullest sense at odds with the democratic way of life.

1 This bulletin is the eighth in a series entitled "The Challenge to Democracy" written by members of the Department of History and Government at Iowa State College.

2 Assistant professor of history.
MUST WE CHANGE OUR MINDS?

Obvious enough, perhaps, and yet here we place our finger on something that we do not always recognize in our customary economic thought. We have, by and large, long tended to regard the machine only as a great human achievement, capable of performing great services for mankind, as promising great things for the future and as working inevitably for the strengthening and invigorating of our democracy. We have in effect said to ourselves that the people of a democracy, beyond furnishing security and a stable medium of exchange, should as an aggregate abstain from economic planning and economic action. Under the stress of competition men will apply their wits to invention and to application of invention, and the solutions to other problems will come as by-products. There will be dislocations, yes—business failures, unemployment, economic inequality. But those who fail and those who are thrown out of work will, after an interval, be reabsorbed in a healthier economy laden with greater opportunities. Differences in economic power there will be, and some will occupy the top rung of the ladder and some will occupy the lower rungs. But in the free play of competition those who occupy the top rung will slip down, and those at the bottom will climb, to preserve in the long run a democratic distribution of power.

Americans of Bryan’s generation condemned with him the ideas presented by the English writer, G. Lowes Dickinson, who, masquerading as a native of the Orient in his little book called Letters from a Chinese Official, acknowledged the technological accomplishments of the Western world but argued that its intellectual powers were centered too sharply upon the augmenting of economic power. In populous China, when a group of boatmen rioted in protest against the construction of a railroad which threatened their means of livelihood, the government accepted responsibility for their welfare and assured them that they would not seriously suffer. “I have learnt,” he wrote, “that the most brilliant discoveries, the most fruitful applications of inventive genius, do not of themselves suffice for the well-being of society; and that an intelligence which is concentrated exclusively on the production of labor-saving machines may easily work more
harm by the dislocation of industry than it can accomplish good by the increase of wealth."

But Americans, quite oblivious of the tariff and other observable instances of political intervention in economic matters, looked askance at such a philosophy. In this era of our history the prevailing belief was that economic planning and economic action were private and not public matters. Indeed, any intervention in the economic realm was regarded as likely to jam the working of a salutary individualism, and the general attitude toward the public official was analogous to the attitude of the character of fiction who "gave it for his opinion that whoever could make two blades of grass to grow where one had grown before would deserve better of mankind and do more essential service to his country than the whole race of politicians put together."

To what extent does a view of industrialism in its world proportions oblige us to modify these views and conclusions? How does it happen that industrialism, which is over a century old and has supported democracy, has in these later years apparently turned against it? In an effort to throw some light upon these questions, let us turn to the story of the development of industrialism in the broader international setting.


Modern technology made its first appearance in England and primarily in the industry of manufacturing, and it was from these centers that the forces issued which shook the existing economic foundations of the civilized world in the course of the nineteenth century and set in motion the process of transformation which we call the Industrial Revolution.

The modern machine is not, strictly speaking, a tool, not merely an adjunct to human or animal power, but belongs in the same class as the windmill and the sailing ship, which are essentially distinct and superior agents for the performance of human work. Though it is not made in the image of man, it is, nevertheless, essentially a new mechanical worker—tireless, nerveless, obedient and capable of doing intricate tasks on a large scale.
It gave, therefore, to the pioneering captains of industry who adopted and improved it a tremendous advantage in production. But at the same time it created serious problems for the working people of England. Owing to the introduction of more scientific methods of tillage and the resulting reduction of labor needs, they were not getting along any too well before the machine made inroads upon the household manufacture of yarn and cloth which had enabled many of them to earn a fair living. In bidding for work as machine tenders in the new factories or as laborers in the expanding auxiliary industries such as mining, women and children were as successful as men, and their wages, averaging from $1 to $2.25 a week, tended to depress the whole wage scale. It was customary to work 16 to 18 hours a day at these sought-after new employments. Working conditions in the factories were a constant threat to life and limb, and the living quarters in the rickety mushroom industrial towns were miserable and squalid.

When the working men began to organize and to bargain collectively, the industrial leaders who, it is only fair to acknowledge, had pressing problems of their own, resisted them successfully with the backing of the English government. When they turned to political action and then to campaigning for political rights and powers, they met the determined resistance of an intrenched aristocracy. The recurring depressions that accompanied industrialization made their lot even more precarious, and it might well have been argued that economic revolution would issue in violent political revolution, that so large a portion of a population well-schooled in the power and meaning of democratic ideals would not submit to the grim decree that Progress seemed ready to enforce.

COMMERCIAL EXPANSION AIDS DEMOCRACY IN ENGLAND

Yet there was no violent political revolution. Some aristocrats who were awake to the condition of the common people and sensitive to the injustice and inhumanity of it, took up their cause and became vigorous and untiring champions of it. Others were willing to make concessions in the face
of the grave internal crisis. The great estate holders, maneuvering for support against the rising power of the industrial interests in Parliament, began to see in political reform a means of creating allies who would assist in sustaining their power. So the government did not stand idly by, nor did it resort to a policy of repression. It passed factory acts, authorized unionization and passed welfare legislation. Starting with the lesser property owners, it extended the rights of suffrage to greater numbers, and as the House of Commons became an increasingly popular body, the aristocrats conceded more and more power to it until it became the sovereign power in British politics.

But economic necessity sets limits to large scale altruism. It sets limits upon the concessions people are willing to make and on the lengths to which strategists are willing to go. Here was a definite and continuous retreat. How could England and the ascendant economic interests afford this extensive social program? How could these interests afford to relinquish their political monopoly? The answer lies mainly in industrial expansion which brought a trend in the direction of prosperity and reduced the importance of political action.

And why industrial expansion? It was assisted by the discovery of new deposits of gold and the general rise of the price level. There were other factors. But mainly it was the outgrowth of overseas commercial expansion. What a difference it made for democracy in England that she was situated with a relatively backward Europe across the channel and with undeveloped countries, especially the United States, across the seas that she commanded! Capital invested in steamship and railway enterprise opened up greater demands for heavy goods, and the facilities created became the channels for the importation of "raw" materials and for the export of credit and machinery and of harassed peoples from England and the continent to the waiting resources of the New World.

ENGLISH INDUSTRIALISM AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

And what a difference it made for the United States that she lay within the orbit of British industrialism! Owing in large measure to the advance of British industry, England
was able to stand off Napoleon, and the United States was able to negotiate the purchase of Louisiana. Owing to her commercial interests England obstructed Spain's efforts to recover control of the Latin American republics, underwrote the Monroe Doctrine and terminated the commercial pressure which had created a great commercial problem in America, especially acute in the administrations of Jefferson and Madison. Now markets were open and accessible, and men and goods were available for the economic development of our vast, virgin resources.

The new demand for production put a premium upon labor, and it was met in the expanding cotton kingdom by the revival of Negro slavery. But in providing a market for the products of the farm, the expansion of the cotton kingdom gave impetus to the rapid expansion of individual free enterprise in the Northwest. The movement of the frontier, the spread of the agricultural way of life and the free play of the commercial spirit, which we regard as the mainstays of our early democracy, were all part and parcel of a worldwide economic development that arose out of the introduction of the machine in England. Owing to a peculiar combination of circumstances, the new technology, fraught with so much menace to democracy, did thus in America, and in England, and on the European continent as well, promote and strengthen the democratic movement. What would the consequences be when England's proteges became themselves dynamic national workshops?

THE MULTIPLICATION OF WORKSHOPS AND THE RISE OF MILITANT IMPERIALISM

If this world were actually, as we have tended to assume, a world of individuals bargaining under the security of a common law, if individual competition were the only contest in life, and if the machine were only a tool which could be easily abandoned in pursuit of new opportunities, then the expansion of the machine might never have brought to the modern world the turbulence and disorder which today threaten our democracy. As a matter of fact, however, the world which British enterprise touched was a world divided into dozens of sovereign states. It was a world in which
varying degrees of individualism were subordinated within a framework of competing nations. It was a world being furnished with equipment requiring a considerable outlay of capital and an extensive organization of skill, labor and marketing agencies which, in the event of the decline of old opportunities and the rise of new opportunities, might become more of an encumbrance than an aid to smooth economic development. Except for a number of severe depressions this fact was obscured by the continuing momentum of growth in the formative years of a world-wide industrialism.

NATIONALISM AND INDUSTRIALISM

Owing largely to the existence of nationalism, industrial plants arose in the United States, Germany, Japan and to a lesser degree in other countries on the European continent, which served even those industrial needs that could have been served more profitably by purchase from other countries, and plants which very soon began to produce in excess of home demands. Public officials were conscious of the fact that they were living in a world where each nation stood on its own strength and that the machine was a source of power and a means of self-defense. Aspiring captains of industry and financiers cultivated and drew confidence from the aid and assurance that political initiative and support provided. The improvement of means of transportation and communication knit all peoples of the world more closely together, it is true, and bound them together more intimately in a complex whole. But, as far as thought and emotion were concerned, it bound most closely those who spoke a common language and shared common institutions, traditions and sentiments. It did, at least in its early stages, increase national consciousness above all, that is, the tendency of a people to regard their country as a universe in itself. Nationalism, in other words, hastened the multiplication of national workshops and encouraged the early appearance of rival commercial expansion in an aggressive and combative form.
INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION AND THE COMING OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

What was the result? England was no longer the England of the early nineteenth century and none of the new industrialized nations was another England. The situation was different. Competition for markets took on the character of belligerent international friction. Governments took an interest in staking off backward areas as possessions, in establishing controls in various quarters of the globe and in building larger navies. In Germany the tense rivalry and a consciousness of the importance of industry in modern warfare and of her own precarious dependence on outside supplies were expressed in the building of an elaborate military machine and in the devising of Blitzkrieg tactics designed to strike down the enemy before he could muster his strength. Needless to say the military precautions everywhere provided an outlet for industry, but they also served to heighten the tension and to make of the first World War, when it did finally break out, a gigantic and horribly destructive conflict.

CIVIL WAR AND "RECONSTRUCTION" IN THE UNITED STATES

In the United States the transition from an economy revolving mainly around British industrialism to an economy revolving mainly around American industrialism was accomplished only at the cost of civil war and degradation in the South. With its capital and managerial interests absorbed in the plantation system, the South was not so responsive as to the opportunities that the rise of a national industry promised. Political differences were aggravated, and as the opposing views became dominant, she attempted to secede. In the ensuing war the union was maintained and the Negro was freed. But the South was not successfully reincorporated in the economic development of the nation, and conditions essential for the utilization of freedom by the emancipated Negro were not provided.

In the absence of statesmanship directed toward economic reconstruction, commercial expansion turned in the direction of existing opportunities westward where American industrialism had an inland empire all its own. As a result of frictions here attendant upon the commercialization of farm-
ing, an Agrarian Revolt was precipitated which inaugurated new democratic reforms. But conditions improved, new farms were carved out of the diminishing virgin soil and the farm income, so vital to the growth of American industry on a basis favorable to democracy, mounted when, as time went on, the industrialized European nations began to consume more and more American foodstuffs.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

With the coming of the war in 1914 this export increased, and American industry further expanded as European nations demanded manufactured goods. American enterprise took over markets relinquished by the British in Canada and Latin America and provided increased quantities of supplies to the Japanese who, together with the United States, took over markets relinquished by European nations in the Orient. We became involved in the war ourselves, but that only served to further expand our industrial plant. Following the War commercial successes were sustained by additional loans to Europe and by the expansion of domestic credit through such innovations as installment buying. Geared to a mammoth and abnormal market, American economic development was in motion at a tempo which could not survive.

It was not until after the war period that we began to feel the unfavorable consequences of the multiplication of workshops in world economy. Under the impact of wartime destruction and disorganization and the ensuing financial chaos, Europe sank into the depths of the Great Depression. Under the pressure of social disorders governments tried to stabilize on a national basis and assumed more and more responsibility for the functioning of national economy. We felt the repercussions but our situation was favorable in comparison with that in Europe. A League of Nations had been established, and democratic governments had been launched in Europe, and it was hoped that negotiation and adjustment would supplant war as the instrument of international competition. But when, shortly after the gates were practically closed to immigration, American credit was now withdrawn, there was no ready means of financing revival, not to speak of industrial reorganization or the priming of development in potentially
prosperous backward areas,—then the economic shortcomings of the peace settlement were tragically revealed. Left as they were, a possession in the hands of investors and financiers who wanted to get them back to work and a means of livelihood upon whose functioning masses of people were dependent for the necessities of life, the national plants were a stimulus to political action designed to restore them intact to full operation.

A WORLD SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY?

Some progress was made in most countries in the direction of recovery by financial devices and the negotiation of commodity exchanges of the sort espoused by Secretary Hull. But in Germany, saddled with a staggering war indemnity and embittered by defeat and frustration, the condition played into the hands of the Nazi leaders. Once in possession of the state they took possession of the German economy and forged it into a new war economy. By coercion, confiscations of wealth and financial acrobatics it was put back to work to manufacture arms and military supplies. When intimidation failed, one of the greatest war machines the world has ever seen was unleashed and, momentarily at least, the effect has been the acquisition of areas which are Germany’s undisputed market and source of supply and the subordination and elimination of rival industries. Is this course the inescapable answer to the problems raised by the introduction of the machine?

REBUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR FREEDOM

The late president of the University of Minnesota, Lotus D. Coffman, wrote a few years ago that “America is making, or is about to make, a momentous decision. It is the decision as to what place she shall occupy among the nations of the earth in the near future. Some think this decision calls for a great army and navy; others for high tariff walls; others for national isolation; others for the breakdown of capitalism, and so on throughout a long list of proposals. But if the history of American life and tradition teaches any lesson, it is that the decision will be made in terms of the kind of education she provides for training in citizenship and for economic growth and development.”
THE SITUATION IN BRIEF

Even though the present struggle in which beleaguered democracy is engaged is fought to a successful conclusion, it will still remain urgent, in fact imperative, that democracy come to grips with the unregarded troubles on the economic front that have prodded peoples of the world into violence and warfare. An unwieldy industrialism has expanded over the world to form a rigid pattern of uneconomical national industrial plants. The commercial expansion or exchange and the economic diversification which peaceful industrial advancement requires have ceased to function. The free flow of capital and men and goods has been jammed up and dammed up. Labor-saving machinery has become, virtually, labor-eliminating machinery. Under the pressure of mounting social problems governments have assumed responsibility for the successful functioning of the economy and in doing so have incurred tremendous debts and in some cases embarked upon military intimidation and conquest. Just how to treat this pathological condition and thereby relieve the international tensions of our times is a towering problem and a problem, it seems, overshadowing all others.

ISOLATIONISM? WHY NOT?

Fortunately the United States contains within its continental boundaries an abundance of most of the requirements necessary for a flourishing and well-rounded economic growth. But if the decision is made to maintain a great army and navy, to erect high tariff walls or to cut ourselves off from the rest of the world, we must reckon with the exactions of international insecurity and permanent defense upon an economy undergoing internal readjustment and upon public income and the standard of living in the years that follow. It is unlikely that inventions will appear and be adopted with speed and regularity sufficient to provide the new opportunities heretofore afforded by advantageous world-wide commercial exchange.

In the face of external pressure what will be the outcome of the internal dissensions that are bound to continue and perhaps to increase? How will we accommodate competition between the larger aggregates of capital and labor which form
the new structure of our society? What is chiefly needed for the conciliation and adjustment of differences, Carl Becker writes, is "time—time for experiment, for making mistakes and correcting them, time for the necessary adjustment in vested interests and the necessary psychological adaptation to new ideas, time for the slow crystallization of public opinion and for registering public opinion in legislative enactments by the cumbersome democratic technique." All in all, there seems to be little prospect for the maintenance and growth of a vigorous and healthy democracy through the medium of fortified isolation against a continuing unfriendly and hostile world.

The conservation and strengthening of democracy points rather toward a whole-hearted and energetic participation in world affairs—but not toward an outright and permanent Anglo-American imperialism accomplished through the continuous use of force. We can acknowledge that this course would be rather narrowly self-centered and still have sound reason for believing that it would be more humane and democratic in method and result than Axis imperialism. It would, however, confer upon us a world of troubles which this sort of domination would multiply. It would purchase freedom for ourselves at the expense of freedom for others and would preserve and perhaps accentuate the dangerous national concept of unlimited legal sovereignty which contradicts the facts of our economic order, and in raising America with England to the position of workshop for the world would probably lead to a rapid reduction in the importance and power of the agricultural interest which has operated as a balance wheel in our politics.

A CHALLENGE TO AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Any venture into the sphere of international politics is, indeed, full of dangers. We can call upon past experience for no direct guidance. It is undertaken at the risk, perhaps, of what we do possess. But if it is true that by shutting ourselves off we would be taking an even greater risk, if the world relations here sketched are a malignant source of our modern difficulties, and if it is true that reasoned goals, however remote and inexact they seem to be, can serve as self-
realizing, guiding principles in the march into a misty future, then another course presents itself as more promising and more practical.

And that is for America and Britain to lead the way toward the organization and inauguration of a world political order, founded on the principles of freedom and tolerance and yet bound together by a system of minimum law which it is the responsibility of all peoples to acknowledge, respect and cooperate in enforcing; to secure the establishment, under this authority, of an international planning agency consisting of expert political and economic representatives; to assign to this agency and its subsidiary boards the direction of post-war reconstruction and monetary adjustment, the supervision of large capital movements, and the creation and advertisement of new opportunities; to direct its efforts especially toward assisting the economical diversification of national industries, toward the progressive dismantling of the various nations' power to wage independent warfare and toward the building up of stagnant areas and of backward areas such as the Balkans which, up to this time, have been able to contribute only slightly to the welfare of the modern world.

The task requires international collaboration and international confidence, and it puts a special strain upon the power of people to understand, to approve and support the proper measures and to maintain responsibility and initiative in the seats of power. It requires that people of contradictory political creeds embrace the democratic faith. It does, therefore, place an importance upon education which is greater than that which President Coffman implied. It requires that every country be a campus of students with trained researchers investigating and deliberating impartially upon social problems, with qualified teachers at the microphones and at the editorial desks devoting themselves to the clarification of these problems and to the critical presentation of them to an interested and sympathetic public. It requires, further, that the people of democratic countries make it their business to enlist confidence and rational loyalty to the principles of democracy among peoples dominated by alien philosophies.

The building of a political organization of this nature and
these proportions, the planning and execution of projects on this colossal scale do themselves raise many bewildering difficulties. But mankind's splendid accomplishment in perfecting the machine, and its failure at the same time to adjust its social relations to the machine, suggest that some substantial move in this direction must be made if democracy is to revive and flourish. And if we are inclined to believe that we are giving our energies to a glorious but lost cause, if we are inclined to say that as a theory of government democracy, even when it functions well, is desirable but in the long run impractical, it will be wise for us to reflect upon G. G. Coulton's judgment that a conception of human life "which kindles the warmest social feelings in the largest number of men, and which casts . . . the clearest light upon their path through human society, is the fittest truth to survive."


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