

THE QUALITY OF OUR GENERATION

THE ACCUMULATION of scientific knowledge having given us such improved machines, and consequently vastly increased opportunities of relieving want by coercive charity, the present age seems to resent any suspicion that the Victorians, with their meagre resources, may have had some justification for preferring self reliance to relying on the State. We have succeeded in disguising workhouse reform as social reform, and by suppressing all mention of the obnoxious word "pauper" have avoided any discussion of whether our methods are likely to make better men. Yet the faith, hope, unity and prosperity of a people are only reflections of their personal qualities. "The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it."

The Report of the Church Assembly's Commission on Evangelism contains some evidence not likely to reassure us on the merits of paternalism as a training for character. Only some 10 per cent. of the population, it appears, are linked to any Christian Church. If the balance represented any gain to that "religion of humanity" which inspired the nobler agnosticism of the past, and was itself so intermingled with Christian ethics, we might perhaps ignore this as only a superficial and possibly temporary shift of feeling. But, in fact, we hear less of the religion of humanity than before. The gain has been entirely to indifference and cynicism. Dependence on the State official does not seem to have deepened our sense of dependence on God. The decay in religious observance has been accompanied by corresponding decay in other spheres. In the past thirty years the annual number of divorces has risen from 500 to 12,000, the Minister of Health refers to the "widespread moral collapse" among a large section of our young people, and doctors, magistrates, teachers all testify not only to startling laxity in sexual conduct but in standards of truth and honesty.

The lack of discrimination in personal conduct is matched by crudeness of taste in literature and art; or, rather, in the wares of the novel and film producers who, operating under conditions of privilege, reap an artificial profit by pandering to the desires of a generation which craves amusement and distraction more than cultivation of the higher emotions.

That all these phenomena proceed from one general tendency is clearly recognised in the Church Assembly's Report. Yet, to judge from the superficial but derogatory reference to the economic history of the Victorian age, it is assumed that, in the sphere of economic thought, by some unexplained freak the general standards of this age have risen superior to those of the age of Pusey, Newman, Spurgeon and Gladstone. It seems that any spiritual feeling, any qualities of conduct and taste which the Victorians possessed must have been in spite of their disposition towards equal freedom to produce and exchange: so deeply rooted is the assumption—seldom clearly stated but implicit in countless chance phrases—that competition is an evil and profit a crime. No doubt this springs from the economic ignorance which supposes one man's gain to be another's loss. It would be presumption to assess the amount of guilt attaching to ignorance; but it is not difficult to see how envy, prejudice, servility, class hatred and the desire for power all encourage the acceptance of this fallacy: so great is the force of common opinion, even among the best, that they are reluctant to see that personal virtues are based on self-respect, self-respect on self-reliance, and self-reliance on economic liberty.

This is apparent not only by comparing different times but by comparing different classes and countries. The middle classes, with all their grave faults, have generally been the least demoralised in all ages and countries; and it is the middle classes who have less opportunity than the richest

classes to exploit others, and more opportunity than the poorest to rely on themselves. Countries in which the mercantile middle classes have been more influential, and where trade has been more free can be compared with those in which paternal governments have long exercised control. Public and private standards in Scandinavia, Holland or Switzerland can easily withstand comparison with those of bureaucratic Russia, Germany or even France. Even in the United States, where until recently vast stretches of unoccupied land preserved a fortuitous economic freedom, State limitation of competition has shown its inevitable effect. When we were a Free Trade country an American ambassador declared: "In my own country I have witnessed the insatiable growth of that form of State Socialism styled Protection, which I believe has done more than any other cause . . . to corrupt public life, blunt public conscience, divorce ethics from politics, and place politics upon the low level of a mercenary scramble."

Nothing but harm can result from imputing to an age or class faults of which it is not guilty. We have no desire, however, to eulogise the Victorian middle classes. Rather is it our purpose to point to their shortcomings as a potent factor leading to the present moral decay. They were shrewder than our generation in discerning that the artificial stimulation of one industry can be achieved only at the expense of others; and, moreover, that under the existing land laws this artificial prosperity could not be retained by the privileged producer but would inevitably gravitate to the monopolist non-producer, i.e., the landlord. But they were by no means sufficiently stirred when a Parliament of landlords carried the series of Enclosure Acts which drove the yeomen of England into the slums of industrial towns or the backwoods of the New World. Under Free Trade wages and conditions rose rapidly to standards far in advance of those comparable countries which retained belief in paternalism, but the middle classes sank all too quickly into the complacency of accepting the Malthusian fallacy as an explanation of the poverty which remained. They combined with the operative classes against the *rural* monopolists of land; but when the land value of the towns began to soar—the value which many of them could engross—they soon identified themselves with landlordism in fact though not in name. The urban landlord, ostensibly industrialist, financier, etc., developing one monopoly from another, and influencing the inner councils of every party in power has grown into the Big Business which thrives under a paternalist regime well suited to the pressure group.

Our Churches do well to draw attention to every phase of the moral collapse. They could do better by a more frank examination of the effect of monopoly of natural resources before accepting the economic fallacies of the age. A similar moral laxity was noticed in Germany under the Weimar Republic which collapsed so easily under the assault of a more emphatic exponent of the idea that the State, by positive action, could provide a good life for all. The Volkswagon remained a promise, the Panzer tank became a reality.

But history never exactly repeats itself. Before the socialism of drift becomes the socialism of purpose the stirrings of the spirit may have produced their effect. But if our countrymen are again to be inspired with the Gladstonian belief "that life is a great and noble calling, an elevated and lofty destiny," we must discard the economic fallacies which force men into servitude. We must establish the economic justice which sets men free.

-F.D.P.

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