

Introductory Note

THIS book is an attempt to sketch some of the major changes which took place in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century.

Anybody who chooses such a subject has an immense canvas before him, on which any number of pictures may be painted. He may concentrate, after the manner of the old-fashioned history textbooks, upon American politics from McKinley to Truman. He may illuminate the contrast between the American position in foreign affairs in 1900 and our uncomfortably massive role half a century later. He may focus on American art, music, literature, or culture, or all of them together; or on the almost incredible advance in medicine and public health; or on the progress of science and technology. He may concentrate upon the waning of puritanism, the loosening of family ties, the reduced authority of parents, the increasing divorce rate, the economic and social and political emancipation of women. He may deal primarily with the changes in American thought about the nature of man and of God, the long decline in the prestige of organized religion, the mood of apprehension in which wars and rumors of wars have caused us to live, and the anxious search for spiritual security in a world full of desperate uncertainties.

Or else he may fix his chief attention upon the changes which have taken place in the character and quality of American life by reason of what might be called the democratization of our economic system, or the adjustment of capitalism to democratic ends; the way in which an incredible expansion of industrial and business activity, combined

with a varied series of political, social and economic forces, has altered the American standard of living and with it the average American's way of thinking and his status as a citizen.

I choose this latter theme for the central one of this book because it seems to me to be of central importance. This, after all, is *the* American story of the first half of the twentieth century. And I choose it for another reason: that I do not believe that the changes which I shall try to describe are as yet very widely understood.

That they are not understood abroad is demonstrated again and again. When Vishinsky or Gromyko or Malik berates the United States, talking, for instance, about "lackeys of Wall Street," what he is doing is berating, exaggeratedly, the United States of 1900 rather than of today. If what he says makes an impression among many non-Communists in Europe, this is at least partly because a very large number of Europeans have been brought up on concepts of the United States long since outdated; and also because they and other Europeans, aware of the importance of business and of businessmen in the American scene, imagine that these, today, closely resemble their counterparts of a generation or two ago, and also behave like the business and businessmen of Europe. The mental picture of the United States that the average European carries about with him is lamentably irrelevant to the real United States of today.

Not only that: the changes that have taken place in the American business system and American life are not fully grasped even by most of us here at home. Our own concepts tend to date sharply, particularly when we get into arguments. The chairman of the board of a great corporation decides to say a few words on behalf of "free enterprise" and against "socialism," and one is suddenly aware that the image of "free enterprise" in his mind looks more like an old-time country store than like the vast, co-ordinated, decentralized institution which he actually manages; and that the "socialism" which he excoriates is a textbook socialism quite different in direction and meaning from anything that has found a significant place in the American scene. The labor leader, in order to encourage the van and to harass the foe from the rear, decides to denounce management and the

stockholders for their "lust for profits" and to arouse the "embattled workers," and he too pulls out of a drawer a well-worn stencil, cut perhaps about the year 1920. And all of us, when we hear a phrase such as "the American way of life," are likely to see in our minds' eyes some pleasant aspect of the America we grew up in as boys and girls; and the older we are, the more anachronistic this mental picture is. It may be useful, therefore, to try to chart some of the changes that have taken place since those images were formed.

The story that I propose to tell has deep shadows in it. Some of those shadows are dark today. It is emphatically not a story of paradise gained. There is no certainty that we have yet learned how to avert economic catastrophe, to say nothing of military catastrophe. Yet in the main it is, I think, a heartening story. In these anxious times we can at least take satisfaction in recalling that the good old days for which some have always yearned were not so good; that we live, despite the wails of the pessimists, in an age of progress; and that it is also—despite the stormy international skies—an age of promise.

F. L. A.

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