



THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHANGE

By F. McEachran

THE FEAR OF CHANGE, which makes men cling to the outworn long after it should have been discarded, is probably not natural to man. It results almost certainly from the hazards of human life as we know it, and is simply an inference from actual experience. Most changes today are for the worse, and so all change tends to get a bad name. Yet despite this fact there have been epochs of change when fear has not been the dominant motive. Generally speaking, such ages were those when the human vista had suddenly been widened, either through discovery of new land or through a rapid, unprecedented exchange of goods. Such periods in Europe were the fifth century B.C., the age of the Renaissance, and the nineteenth century, in each of which the enterprise of living was easier for a time¹ and the human spirit seemed to blossom forth anew.

Such periods, as a rule, have not lasted long, partly because the actual economic changes were incomplete and maladjusted, and partly because human inertia prevented full use being taken of new advantages. But none the less, marvellous things were done. To the first period we owe the efflorescence of Greek speculation and art, the influence of which is even now not exhausted. To the second we owe the re-birth of science in the modern world, and to the third the first dim vista of a world which should be *both international and free*.

The fact that on each occasion the clamp of reaction came only too rapidly need not make us forget the more primordial truth. On each occasion something was acquired by the race which will never be forgotten. The seeds of hope were sown.

We are in the fortunate position of knowing now the law by which change in social life works, and that in itself is a solace. We know that the fight for economic change — which was the *fight for the open market* — was also the *fight for freedom*, and we have reduced the whole process to technical terms. We know that if the Greeks after the Medea wars produced marvellous art and literature it was because the Greeks of that time in their production as a whole were freer than they had been before or after, and we know precisely why. We are aware, too, of what went wrong in the change that produced the Renaissance and Reformation, and what later vitiated the "freedom" of the industrial revolution. And now before our very eyes the whole facade is crumbling

and the world is again changing for the worse. But the one solace remains that amidst ruin there is more knowledge. At the next crisis in history we may make the right adjustment. This at least gives us hope.

History is a long process. There are many philosophies of "change," and some have been partially successful. But there are other philosophies which deny its significance, and their number is far greater. This is because power has nearly always been in the saddle, and philosophy has often obeyed its behests. Thus it is more than a coincidence that the philosophies which deny change are usually created when society has got itself "jammed" and wants as far as possible to conceal the fact. Plato, for example, denied the reality of the changing world, using the "Ideas" of his master, Socrates, and the "One" of Parmenides for the purpose. He did it, curiously enough, just at that point in Athenian history when the free democracy was dying out and power was settling down in the hands of a few. No one would accuse him of doing this with any ulterior motive, but the fact remains that he did it. The philosophy of Heraclitus, who advocated the free flowing world as the world of reality, would just as well have been used as a means of metaphysical unity, except for the fact that "free" flowing was not a point acceptable to a conservative Athens. The world of freedom of Heraclitus was the earlier world of Greece, not the Greece of Plato and Aristotle. Its fame has not diminished through the centuries and may yet live to bear away the palm of glory.

A brief glance at the history of philosophy will reveal that this conflict between the metaphysics of freedom and that of congealed stability has always existed, and reflects with occasional time-lags what is going on in the material world. The "system" of Plato was too poetic and personal to suit the general structure of the centuries that followed, and it was the work of Aristotle to "organise" and "materialise" platonism into forms more adaptable to the world empire of Rome. Another force working in the same way was the stoic doctrine which, with its stronger ethical trend, found universal popularity among the Roman ruling classes. The emphasis of the Stoics on the sameness of all things (*eadem sunt omnia semper*), on the necessity of human self-control midst disaster, and of giving help without pity, suited well the decadent slave-empire of Rome. It was more suited perhaps to the slave-owners than the slaves, who preferred the doctrine of Christ, but that only became important later. In a slowly crumbling society stoicism taught how

¹ Only for a limited number of people, of course.

to live without hope, to grin and bear it, and that was enough. And slowly, as the Empire disintegrated and a new barbarism arose, the element of "change" could once more be discerned in the rising doctrine of neo-platonism, the theory of God as a fountain overflowing.

In the thirteenth century a new superimposed "order" made itself felt. This was the Arabian Aristotle, newly imported from the pagan world and moulded by Thomas Aquinas into a system which crystallised all that was good in the Middle Ages. Its fine fruits were the Gothic spires, and the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, in themselves sufficient to vouch for a civilisation quite different from that of antiquity. And as long as the underlying current of neo-platonism was sufficient to vitalise the superimposed "order" and to make it organic, the resulting product was admirable. Only gradually with the decay of Thomism did the organic order become a mere husk and the world hold its breath for the Renaissance.

At the Renaissance two great conflicting philosophies reveal respectively the rival claims of monopoly and freedom. On the one hand, Rabelais and the Italian, Bruno, reflect the liberating feeling of "change," while on the other (a generation or so later) we have Montaigne and Descartes reflecting precisely the opposite. In the two centuries following, Shaftesbury in England, Leibniz and Herder in Germany, managed to keep the neo-platonic tradition alive, and even Spinoza, who might seem to stand in the direct line from Descartes to Kant, is now known to have had dynamic ideas. What he says about his one ultimate substance is almost exactly what Leibniz said about the infinite monads.

The nineteenth century brings us to two philosophers of change who are perhaps the most significant of all, Hegel in Germany and Herbert Spencer in England. The latter probably came nearer to the truth than any philosopher who has ever lived, and his present obscurity may very likely be an indication of our own decadence. His collection of essays *Man and the State* shows a complete realisation of the difference between society and the state, of the nature of public-private co-operation, and the inevitability of any developed state-planning turning in a military direction. In his early days he was aware of the significance of the land monopoly, but later in life, possibly for reasons of caution, he dropped the economic line in favour of the ethical. The result of this was that although everything he said was true as far as it went, it seemed to most people of the time completely irrelevant. The slums were growing and unemployment rising. The world asked for bread, not ethics.

At the same time, there were forces in the West which were working towards a philosophy of change, not only in the romantic figures of Bergson and Nietzsche, but also in the soberer psychology of the Americans, William James and Dewey, who will go down in history as the founders of Pragmatism. Of the two, Bergson is the one who dabbles most in metaphysics, but he will be remembered less for his theory that intuition is more primordial than intellect, than for the general biological sweep of his arguments. No one can read Bergson without coming away more aware of the inward springs of life, tied down

to no super-imposed formula and no fetters. For that alone his services will be remembered.

The figure of the lone and demented Nietzsche seems more remote than that of Bergson, but probably as a writer and prophet he is more fundamental. His description of the state as the "coldest of all cold monsters" strikes the right note from the beginning, and in the midst of his worst excesses, even when the arguments are wrong, the instincts are right. At bottom a classicist, Nietzsche is really advocating the free individual taking the consequences of his own "original sin," in much the same way as the tragic hero does in Dante, Goethe, and Shakespeare. The guarantee that the law within will be "good and social" is simply that men are naturally similar, and converge in their ends. Nietzsche sees as clearly as Herbert Spencer and Darwin the marvellous relief of the right adaptation, and where he goes wrong is nearly always owing to his ignorance of the real background. The philosopher who also really understands economics has not yet been born.

Right Diagnosis—Wrong Remedies

REFORMERS pop up in every quarter and in every age. Today, in the Latin American sphere, "reform" is in the air — demanded by intellectuals, university students, peasants and governments. Reform has begun to acquire a more radical meaning. Equality in law, free elections and universal education are no longer enough. There is a growing demand for the redistribution of land, a feeling that minimum wages must be fixed, and that social insurance is necessary. In fact, Latin American countries are showing all the signs of insecurity and imbalance witnessed in Europe and North America for a century or more.

George Pendle's book, *A History of Latin America* (a Pelican Original, 4s.), directs our attention to the pace of "reform" in the newly-developing countries. Through such ardent reformers as Zapata in Mexico, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, and Fidel Castro in Cuba, the reader is projected into these seething, discontented countries, to be made acutely aware of their problems, many of which spring from archaic systems of land ownership.

The pattern of the economy is familiar—the industrial revolution and the "population explosion." Millions of people are migrating from farms and villages, attracted by higher wages and richer rewards, creating a whole new set of problems and social tensions — housing, hygiene, education.

This book tells the old story of how land ownership channels the harvest of man's labour into private pockets, when so easily, and justly, it could be returned to the community and bring progress with prosperity.

Pendle, who knows Latin American countries like the back of his hand, gives us a vivid enough picture and poses the problem. Alas, he does not know the simple answer.

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