

The Marxist Road from Moscow

THE TRIUMPH OF AMERICAN CAPITALISM. By Louis M. Hacker. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1940. 460 pp., with index. \$3.

Reviewed by JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

IN its broad outlines Louis Hacker's "The Triumph of American Capitalism" will not seem an earth-shaking document to those who have long accepted the role of economics in human affairs. Its thesis is the familiar Beardean thesis: that the United States was born in revolt against economic oppression by the British mercantile state; and that it reached industrial maturity because of the "second American Revolution" that was the Civil War. Mr. Hacker keeps a diligent eye upon class forces; like his Marxist cousins, he sees the state as the instrument of dominating economic power, and history, for him, is preeminently the "history of class struggles."

So much being true, the reader who is tired of an old story might be expected to toss Mr. Hacker aside with a contemptuous "I've read my Beard." But any such reader would be making the mistake of a lifetime. For "The Triumph of American Capitalism" is a remarkable document—and it is the more remarkable in that Mr. Hacker, once a professed Marxist, here turns the critical instruments of Marxism against all the old familiar Marxist assumptions about America.

It is a prime tenet of Marxism, of course, that there are no "exceptional" nations: all countries must go through the same dialectical development from primitive capitalism to socialism, with the "proletariat" serving everywhere in the role of messiah and organizer of the final "classless" stage. There will be differences in tempo, of course; but no matter, the end must be identical in spite of special mitigating circumstances. Since he has called himself a Marxist in the past, I suppose that Mr. Hacker once believed this; but in "The Triumph of American Capitalism," although he plugs the class analysis with almost wearying zest, he now flatly asserts that "the American tradition"—a compound of the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, Jeffersonianism, Old Radical Republicanism, and Populism—will make the coming American "State capitalism" a rich and democratic thing. No Stalin-Hitler tyranny, no "dictatorship of the proletariat," here: free speech, a free associational life, equality before the law, and, finally, the right to challenge oppressive pub-



Drawing by C. L. Baldrige
Louis Hacker has a double thesis.

lic authority, are all with us to stay.

Such a bold statement that mind-stuff can triumph over economic organization comes strangely from an historian of Marxian parentage. Several years ago Mr. Hacker told me that he was tired of the continual harping on one note of the Frederick Jackson Turner school of historians, all of whom ascribed the peculiar contour of American history to the fact of the open frontier. European capital, said Mr. Hacker, had had just as much to do with American development; for hadn't English and Dutch money built the railroads that tied the frontier in with European and world capitalism? And if we were always thus an integral part of world capitalism, how could our bourgeois democracy resist the march of the Marxian dialectic? The dialectic had triumphed in Russia, another country which had borne a colonial relationship to western Europe; and if Russia succumbed, why not the United States?

If you are an orthodox Marxist, there can be only one answer to this question. But Mr. Hacker is more honest than orthodox. In the course of writing "The Triumph of American Capitalism" he discovered his earlier thesis about United States dependence on European capital to be almost wholly fallacious. It was true that English money built some of our railroads, notably the Illinois Central; but the great post-Civil War industrial aggregates—Carnegie Steel, Rockefeller's oil company, the Union and Southern Pacific railroads—were all conjured out of American air so far as the financing went. The big industrial figures of the American nineteenth

century all began as poor boys: Eli Whitney, Cyrus McCormick, Philip D. Armour, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Henry Clay Frick, and John W. Gates all made their fortunes without recourse to the money markets of Amsterdam or London. In Russia conditions were exactly the opposite: Russian industry was dependent on loans from western Europe, and the Russian middle class was, therefore, a weak, wavering class with no bone-deep interest in freedom, in self-reliance, and in inventiveness.

Mr. Hacker's double thesis, then, is that the United States has reached industrial maturity independently of the course of events in western Europe, and that somehow the atmosphere of freedom engendered by such economic levitation will carry over into the State capitalism that is even now upon us. We are, so to speak, happy prisoners of our verbal reflexes: simply because we have been taught to respond to the phrases of "liberty," "equality," and "freedom," we are safe no matter what the economic form of the future.

Such a conclusion is inspirational, and—assuming that we are to have the Scandinavian type of State capitalism, not the Russian or the German type—I believe it to be true. But Mr. Hacker fails to draw an inference from his findings that should, I think, be stressed. If the United States could grow so great merely by tending to its knitting and matching its men with its land and its metals, why the hulla-baloo in certain quarters about our dependence on the fate of world finance? We got along—indeed, we owe our very freedom—to the fact that, unlike Russia, China, or Mexico, we did not depend on international money markets. Today we are urged to accept our "responsibilities" as a world banker. But if international borrowing, on Mr. Hacker's showing, leads either to slavery or repudiation, then doesn't it follow that international lending makes the banker responsible for the slavery of other nations?

Mr. Hacker's book is in no sense an isolationist document; and elsewhere he has written that the United States must take the imperialist road of nineteenth century Britain. But if he has proved that an undeveloped nation can thrive without importing capital, maybe it can be proved that a developed nation is not dependent for internal prosperity on the export of capital. If one part of the Marxian thesis is wrong, then maybe the other part is wrong, too. What about it, Mr. Hacker?

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THE ONE INDISPENSABLE

IT requires no range-finder to detect that the air in liberal circles is quivering with disillusion and confusion, or to confirm our fears that almost all our favorite dogmas or ideas of only a few years back have been obscured or obliterated under the pressure of changing events. To refresh your memory concerning those ideas, take down a representative armful of books published half a decade or so ago. Turn to—among others—Dos Passos or Farrell or Dreiser or Hemingway in fiction; to Chase or Sheean or MacLeish or Mumford or Frank in non-fiction. It is difficult to draw a least common denominator from the analyses and conclusions of their books, but a little addition shows that the sum total approximates a number of attitudes and convictions having wide acceptance at the time. War was to be condemned under all conceivable circumstances; there was a general distrust of economic and social America as constituted to cope with the needs of the people, or to survive a crisis; centralization or concentration of power was regarded as not only desirable but inevitable; socialism or some form of a rigidly planned economy were put forward as responsible solutions.

We have been right in expecting that these beliefs might shortly be put to the test, but we have been frequently wrong in anticipating the conditions under which the tests would be made, and more often wrong in pre-judging the results. We scorned war and therefore the instruments of war because we ourselves had no quarrel with other peoples within the visible future, and because we seemed to think that *all* civilization had at last outgrown war. The beautiful glow of this vision obscured the reality that forces far more destructive than war might be loosed which would issue a challenge and determine the rules and conditions under which that challenge might be contested or inflicted. Ob-

scured, too, were other factors: the pulling power of our own ideals and emotions under fire; the possibility that lack of instruments of warfare, far from being an automatic guarantee of lasting peace, might be regarded by better-armed powers as an invitation to war; the likelihood that civilization would not outgrow war until it could produce a dominant species of beings as far above man as man is above animal, overcoming the problems of race suicide with as great success as man himself in overcoming the problems of fire, water, and weather.

Similarly, the prescriptions we wrote for the ills of society have been filled in a manner as disappointing as it is confounding. We called for greater centralization of power, but we were thinking only in terms of power for greater good, forgetting that it could also be used for greater evil. Those of us who said that socialism alone could eliminate our poverty and suffering were surprised and frightened when under that name emerged full-blown personal dictatorships which extended the realm of suffering far beyond the ordinary imagination, and which bent their primary efforts not toward justifying their power but toward maintaining and extending that power. Even less, perhaps, was it suspected that countries flying the

banner of socialism—national or international—would threaten directly our own fundamental concepts of living and thinking, or that we might have to fight those countries for our very lives. *Dis aliter visum!*

Little wonder that contemporary literature is strewn with disillusion. Little wonder that there is so much propping-up of convictions with straws, so much groping on the fringes of reality, so much dread of the future. To paraphrase the title of Freda Utley's new book (the most recent and perhaps the best of the disillusion confessionals), the dreams we have lost are many.

What, then, remains? If we are in a fight now—and we are—what is left that we are fighting for? The feeling continues to grow that we are fighting for time to think. We are fighting for time to keep decisions in our own hands, even though we may not be sure now what those decisions may be. We are fighting for time to probe deeper the lessons of the past to learn why it is that history has played strange tricks with our convictions, twisting them into such unrecognizable and antagonistic realities. We are fighting for time to build or resurrect ideals that will brave the years.

Time to think. It is a strange fight but no fight ever had a nobler goal.
N. C.

Citation for a Bed

By Elizabeth K. Phelps Stokes

MR. PRESIDENT, I present this candidate for a degree
For those who serve earth, air, fire, water, universally:

The cradle of the river's way
Its guardian dangerous or gay,
Its bed.

That which parched holds the showers
Not for its own thirst but for flowers,
Their bed.

The rocks that in mountains and oceans act
As foundations that hold the world intact,
Their bed.

Handing the scroll, the President said,
Bed, I give you the highest degree—of comfort,
And all the rights and privileges
A man is entitled to
Who measures his ache
Blesses your make
And drops into you.

And the bed said,
Gentlemen, I am not well read
And I hardly know two out of three
Words of your kind eulogy
But if you follow me
I say,
All you who shed the weary scholar's gown
Come to me,
I will support you, and rest your labors down.

The coals and flames of living fire
Serving man's constant desire,
Their bed.

For the air, all the anonymity
Cushioning an extremity,
Its bed.

For the animal kingdom, its gratitude
For sleep in dry straw in plenitude,
Its bed.

As a human symbol monumented
Let plain wood be documented,
The bed.