

The Open Court

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Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

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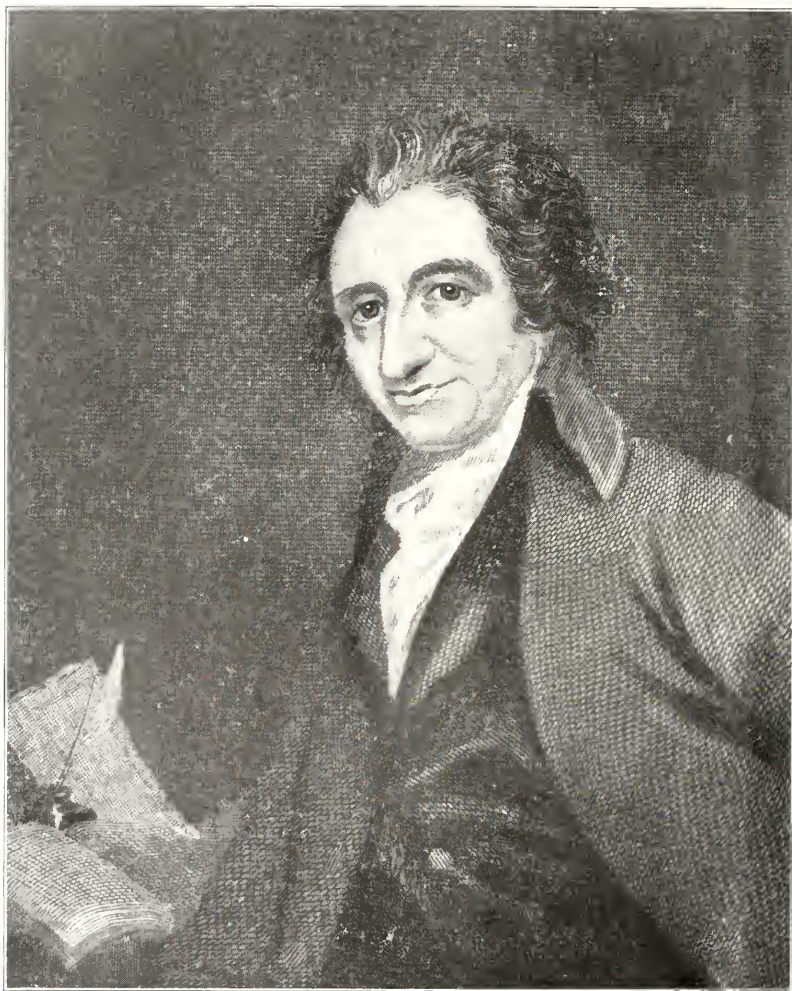
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THE WANING OF LIBERALISM.

BY ROLAND HUGINS.

THE vital political forces of our day have drawn into three streams: the older Liberalism, a revived Toryism, and a new proletarianism. To one of them belongs the world and the future; to which one we do not yet know. A glance at the world to-day discloses a Joseph's coat of political colors. Some countries stand out a Bolshevistic red, some a socialistic pink, some a nationalistic green, and some an imperialistic black. Others show a smudge of gray that betokens conflicting tendencies. In no one of the great nations to-day is Liberalism safely dominant. Everywhere trust in formal democracy appears to be crumbling; the conflict between capital and labor becomes embittered; the possessive classes incline more to compulsion and less to compromise; discontent grows militant and intransigent; and the world is offered, apparently, a narrowing choice between reaction and revolution. Of course, the newer tyrannies are not openly avowed, and the older Liberalism is used to screen projects of force and fraud. But the substance is abandoned. The nations are trading, morally, on their yesterdays.

Astute observers, like L. T. Hobhouse and Francis Delaisi, remarked long before the world war on the weakening of the barriers against violence. Incidentally, have prophets ever been more fully justified? Has a book ever found so dramatic a sequel in fact as the war supplied to *Democracy and Reaction*? According to this masterly diagnosis a change in the temper and spirit of European thought, about 1870, came as the result of several concurrent causes. The shift of the middle class from radicalism to conservatism, the retreat of humanitarianism before the new cult of hardness and discipline, the profitableness of investments in the backward lands, the popular misconception of Darwinism as a scientific demonstra-

tion that might is right, or in more accurate phrase, that success is its own justification—all these formed a coalition of tendencies hostile to the philosophy and the will that created and sustained the American Republic, that carried forward Cobden, Bright, and Gladstone on the crest of popular acclaim, and that gave impetus to republicanism and socialism on the Continent. The world, unheeding for the most part, passed into a new era.

The shrunken Liberalism of our day cannot, however, urge as alibi the changed temper of the times. It has itself thrown away much of the prestige gained through its great victories. It early identified itself with the doctrines of *laissez faire*. Bright actually fought against better labor laws for women and children. Mill would have nothing to do with projects for attracting greater talents into the service of the State. Spencer wanted to reduce all government to a municipal police force. Although Liberalism later recovered from this error and endorsed legislative aid to the worker, the conversion came too late. Laboring men, at least, have not formed the habit of looking on Liberals as champions. They have fallen back on their own efforts. In the breasts of many Liberals themselves, moreover, enthusiasm for individual rights has waned. Some Liberal factions, like that of Grey, Haldane, and Asquith, in England, have flirted with the specious ideal of national efficiency, not realizing, apparently, that this is simply to compound with the enemy—with those who place authority above liberty. In recent years Liberalism has allowed itself to take the position of a party of protest, at a time when working-class minorities were making more vigorous protests. It has lost its hold on the imagination of the people. The forces of reaction have on their side all the immense prestige that goes with power and organized force. They have the visible symbols of strength—dreadnoughts and endless columns of marching men. Labor parties have grown more revolutionary in tone and have attracted adherents by the very daring of their program. Between the helmets on the one side, and the red flags on the other, has stood a dwindling Liberalism, not fully knowing its own mind, negative, timid, increasingly futile.

The working-class parties have been afflicted with no such doubts or hesitations. We see them in our day moving steadily toward the left, toward a policy of revolt, direct action, and coercion, much to the consternation of a bewildered and self-satisfied bourgeoisie. This drift was plain before the war, in such movements as syndicalism. The war itself, with the exhausting drains it made everywhere on the common man, and with the revelation of the

inability of Liberal forces, in democracies and autocracies alike, to hold imperialism in check, drove the proletariat further toward open rebellion. Legitimate discontent has linked itself with envy and despair. The less-well-off have leagued themselves with the disinherited and the desperate. And the result is Bolshevism.

Objectively considered, the new Toryism is the most interesting of the three political powers. It is a coalition embracing many factions: those whose natural disposition is toward the enforcement of order and discipline; those whose fear of revolution blinds them to any need of improvement; those who derive profits from exploitation, at home or abroad; those to whom wealth is a higher consideration than life. All those tendencies that enfeebled Liberalism, bolstered witless conservatism. The Tories rode the tide of the time. But they also exerted themselves to secure popular support. Disraeli, with the insight of genius, made the paradox of "democratic Toryism" a political reality, and formed a union between the gentlemen of England and that mass that loves a lord. Bismarck knew how to turn the trick in Germany, largely with industrial insurance and similar measures of social justice. The new masters of the world have learned an invaluable lesson: that public opinion can be controlled. They enlist the organs and agents of publicity. They have reduced propaganda to an art in which they are more adept than commercial advertisers. Governments, of whatever shade, now consider it entirely proper to manipulate opinion and emotion for their purposes. They suppress unorthodox sentiment—when they dare.

The latter-day Tories, it must be understood, are able. While the Liberals have been harboring illusions, and the proletarians delusions, the Tories have cornered most of the world's supply of skepticism. That is what renders them so powerful in politics. They know what they want: the whip-hand; and they are willing to make concessions that leave the reins between their fingers. They ride behind any steed that will pull them: democracy or bureaucracy, nationalism or internationalism.

The fact that the new Toryism has been forced to camouflage itself at every salient gives hope that Liberalism will again assert itself triumphantly. Most men and women who hold to the ordinary decencies of life would revolt, were their minds not befuddled by abstractions, from the wholesale cruelties, treacheries, confiscations that Tories perpetrate. But many Liberals are incapable of seeing the world as it is. They do not know the past of this present. They seek to interpret the events of our tumultuous day in mental

terms that had currency, and validity, a generation ago. They have not understood the history of the last fifty years; between 1871 and 1914 their minds are a blank. If you ask them about the great Reaction, they can neither describe it nor place it. If you speak of the revival of imperialism in Europe—in England, France, and Italy—they do not appear aware that you are talking about the latter part of the nineteenth century. They imagine that the retrograde movement which brought the Pan-German party, with its policy of national piracy, into power in Central Europe, was peculiarly Prussian. The war has armored their ignorance.

Is it possible that there is any one in the world who does not know that a generation ago the tendency for empires to shrink came to an end, and that a new scramble for colonies ushered in a period of unscrupulous expansion? Are there intelligent people to-day who do not realize that the great victories of Liberalism in the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, for individual rights, self-government of colonies, free trade, international peace, were no sooner achieved than they began slowly to melt away? Are there Liberals so wrapped in a romantic theory of the progressive emancipation of man that they are utterly unable to adjust themselves to the fact that there has been a backwash in the affairs of man? There are many such; and every day we see them championing new tyrannies, offering themselves as vanguards for the unprincipled forces of reaction; wearing, willingly, like a raiment, Napoleon's code of honor, Machiavelli's standards of truth.

America, it may be, stands on the edge of disillusionment. A sane interpretation of the immediate past would light up the present and the future like an intellectual star-shell. Unfortunately the reaction has invaded our own shores. If one were free from preconceptions all he would need to do is to look about him. The United States, which scarcely yet realizes the true nature of the forces which are changing the face of the world, has hitherto refrained from selfish aggression and has acted with an unexampled unselfishness in international affairs. But during the war reactionary forces began to make headway here also. We have conscription and we have prohibition. We too have political prisoners, as the result of our abridgments of free speech and free press. We are abandoning individualism. There has come a general stiffening and hardening of the national temper. And these are but first steps in the direction of the Reaction. America as a whole remains Liberal at heart. It is still under the sway of Victorian ideals. But what will to-morrow show? Who would be surprised if we

were forced to do a little "police work" in Mexico which left, say, Lower California and Sonora in our hands; or if we adopted a system of universal military training; or if the wartime suppressions of opinion were perpetuated in peace? Who indeed!

Of course, it is not inspiring to believe that we have struck an eddy in the current of progress, and are in danger of turning backward. But it will be far more dispiriting to continue wrapped in illusion until a catastrophe to our own social order opens our eyes. The tradition of optimism runs tremendously strong in this country. We insist that not only our fiction but our historical speculations have happy endings. Sooner or later we shall be shaken awake, and return to realism and sincerity.

The new age will not all be black, cannot all be black in any event. An era of discipline, order, and force will have at least the virtues of its defects. The twentieth century knows how to organize human and technical resources better than any time that preceded it. It utilizes science and all the skill of men with increasing effectiveness. When it starts out to "reform," it can reform more expeditiously and thoroughly. Its philanthropy is as far advanced over the almsgiving of yesterday as modern sanitation is superior to the open sewer or modern surgery to amputation. Many of the present generation have accepted this advance in reforming technique as the sign and substance of progress. Unfortunately, this generation has no clear idea of where it wants to go. It can get to a given social objective more speedily than could its fathers; it prefers always to be on the move; it inveighs against "drifting." But it is weak on precisely the vital matter, that of destination. Equally with the conservatives, our pseudo-progressives have abandoned the essence of individualism. They do not yet realize that "reforms" which fail to make the world safe and satisfying for the individual are worse than no reforms at all. Germany first showed the world what can be done by a thoroughgoing organization of the psychic and social energies of a people. But Germany turned her remarkable organization to imperialistic ends. Toward what ends are other nations shaping their destinies? We are in peril of practising what we condemn. The West moves together.

Those who gloss over the reaction are dangerous. We are traveling, in so far as we are traveling at all, on the momentum of the older Liberalism. Its impetus is not all spent. But there has come a perilous break in the tradition of reform. How much genuine enthusiasm do we find among our leaders for, say, proportional representation, old-age and disability insurance, or taxes

on inheritance and unearned increment? Capitalism appears congealed by fright, and unable to rid itself of its abuses. We want to retain our free and optimistic America, our privileges of equal opportunity and our hopes for our future. Yet we are irritated and confused. We go on tightening an authoritarian regime, creating a regimented society that sacrifices happiness to efficiency, and seeks its guarantees in force, even though we are brought thereby to a desperate endeavor to salvage the very elements of order and peace.

This country is really at the fork of the road. The heart of America is sound. The purpose of America is high. Probably the nation will pull through into a period of genuine Liberalism. America is the last great citadel that guards the ideals, the hopes, the principles of the age that is going: the age that began with the Reformation and ended in Armageddon. And if America succumbs to the reaction it will be a long and weary time before the world emerges into the sunshine of another day.