

THE NEW LITERATURE OF APPROACH.

BY ROLAND HUGINS.

FACING REALITY. By Esme Wingfield-Stratford. New York: George H. Doran Company.

MANHOOD OF HUMANITY: The Science and Art of Human Engineering. By Alfred Korzybski. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

THE MIND IN THE MAKING: The Relation of Intelligence to Social Reform. By James Harvey Robinson. New York: Harper and Brothers.

PUBLIC OPINION. By Walter Lippman. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

A NEW literature of ideas is coming into being. It embodies itself in a stream of books and articles, ever growing in volume, calling on humanity to revise its point of view, and to meet a changed world with a mind reborn. It demands a fresh vision and a fresh start. It seeks, indeed, to work a mental revolution on a grand scale. And it takes itself with immense seriousness.

Nearly every separate specimen of this literature of orientation differs widely, in superficial aspects, from all other specimens, for the reason that the several authors come to the social problem with different cultural backgrounds. Some of the writers are historians, some psychologists, some engineers, some journalists. But whether they profess to speak for history, or science, or the world of affairs, they arrive at curiously similar conclusions. The truth is that a certain well-defined stock of ideas circulates through our post-war world, and in this stock all of our intellectuals trade. Before we look at individual books, let us examine a number of the ideas common to all, or to most, of them. The more important of the current conceptions are these:

First, That something fundamentally wrong marks and vitiates our civilization. The very bases are insecure. This social and moral bankruptcy of the world is treated as a self-evident assump-

tion rather than as a thesis to be proved. And indeed to most minds the calamities of the war and its aftermath make the assumption entirely plausible. Pessimism is fashionable. Chronic critics of the social order, who have been uttering doleful prophecies for years, now go about with an air of smug dissatisfaction. The most resolute optimists show that they are disturbed and perplexed by giving vent to angry denunciations. Nearly everyone admits the need of some sort of reconstruction; and of course this attitude of mind affords an excellent opening for the revisionists.

Second, The human race is in its infancy. Beings that may be called human or at least anthropoid, have existed on this planet for approximately 500,000 years, for the most part in a state of untrammelled savagery. If you construct a racial time scale, the whole period of civilization looks about as wide as a wafer laid on top of a flag-pole. Why be surprised at any lapse on the part of creatures with such a lineage? Somewhere in all of us crouch a barbarian and a beast.

Third, Within the period of civilization itself, and particularly within the last few centuries, scientific and mechanical progress has far outstripped social and political progress; the one has raced ahead at accelerated speed, while the other has lagged behind or stood still. This generalization was clearly enunciated by the Victorians. But it was given demonstration and emphasis by the war, when the whole range of scientific invention was utilized in the art of killing. In political philosophy and ethical practice we have improved little on Aristotle, whereas Aristotle's physics and zoology are as obsolete as the bow and arrow.

Fourth, the mind of man, and hence man himself, is held in bondage by delusion and ignorance, and needs release. We have not faced reality. We are so busy rationalizing our prejudices that we cannot see things as they are. We cling to superstitions and to conventional modes of thought. We have failed to comprehend the real nature of Man. We have not learned to make our intelligence our guide.

But lo, the enlightenment cometh!

For example, here is Dr. Esme Wingfield-Stratford. In a long book of caustic comments entitled, "Facing Reality," he finally comes to the pith of his matter in a chapter on "Reality and the Social System." He says:

"It is no part of my purpose to enter into competition with those who offer patent devices for making new worlds out of old.

Soviets and national guilds, the reform of the tariff and the resuscitation of the manor may or may not have their uses—that is a matter for inquiry—but they are not, and cannot be, panaceas. Society is too complex to be put right by any formula.

“The only way of salvation is to reform the thought that gives birth to the institutions, to forsake the unreal for the real, the formula for the reality. To change the visible order is merely to regild or dye red the surface, but change the spirit and all the rest follows.”

Well, suppose we did change the spirit, what then would happen? Obviously, says Dr. Wingfield-Stratford, many 'pleasant things. “It would be seen how that which binds us together is of infinitely more importance than that which separates us. War between class and class and nation and nation would appear as insane and wicked as a mutiny on board a sailing vessel rounding Cape Horn in a gale.” We would conserve our natural resources. We would make machines our servants, to do the dirty work of the world. We would make work a pleasure instead of a drudgery. Does all this sound rather thin and general? “We have made no attempt,” declares Dr. Wingfield-Stratford, “to formulate a programme for the social reformer, or to give more than the barest hint of the difficulties and dangers that beset him. This is an age that cries out for a formula as an earlier generation for a sign. But before any sort of programme can avail there must come a change of spirit If once men were enabled to turn and see themselves as they really are, comrades and fellow soldiers in a struggle to which the greatest wars of history are but the bickerings of children, if they could realize how fatally they are even now wasting their opportunity, and how near their criminal blindness has brought them to the brink of ruin, they would turn with such earnestness and unanimity to the task of their own salvation that the details would soon become clear. It is, in the deepest sense of the word, religion for the lack of which we go blind.”

Alfred Korzybski, in his “Manhood of Humanity,” has endeavored to “approach the problem of Man from a scientific-mathematical point of view.” He writes with a lively sense of the importance of his message; he is continually urging the reader to realize that what he is saying is “exceedingly important,” “very momentous” or “of mighty significance.” He seems oblivious that for the most part he is dressing up old theory in new terminology. Here is his thesis: that plants are chemical-binders, or energy-bind-

ers, that animals are space-binders, and that men are time-binders. Time-binding is "the human dimension." It is "the power to roll up continuously the ever-increasing achievements of generation after generation endlessly." It is "the peculiar power, the characteristic energy, the defining mark of man." Advancement in the physical sciences, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and astronomy, leaps ahead by "geometrical progression," while advancement in the social sciences, ethics, jurisprudence, economics, politics and government, creeps along by "arithmetical progression." Heretofore the real nature of man has not been understood. He has been regarded either as an animal, or as a monstrous hybrid between an animal and a supernatural spark, or divine soul. But the real nature of man is now clear. He is a time-binder. This opens up, so says the author, the science of Human Engineering.

"The ethics of humanity's manhood will be neither 'animal ethics' nor 'supernatural' ethics. It will be a natural ethics based upon a knowledge of the laws of human nature. It will not be a branch of zoology, the ethics of tooth and claw, the ethics of profiteering, the ethics of space-binding beasts fighting for 'a place in the sun.' It will be a branch of humanology, a branch of Human Engineering; it will be a time-binding ethics, the ethics of the entirely natural civilization-producing energies of humanity. . . .

"In humanity's manhood, patriotism—the love of country—will not perish—for from it—it will grow to embrace the world, for your country and mine will be the world. Your 'state' and mine will be the Human State—a Co-operative Commonwealth of Man—a democracy in fact and not merely in name. It will be a natural organic embodiment of civilizing energies—the wealth-producing energies—characteristic of the human class of life. Its larger affairs will be guided by the science and art of Human Engineering—not by ignorant and grafting 'politicians'—but by scientific men, by honest men who *know*.

"Is it a dream? It is a dream, but that dream will come true. It is a scientific dream and science will make it a living reality.

"How is the thing to be done? No one can foresee all the details, but in general the outline and process is clear. Violence is to be avoided. There must be a period of transition—a period of adjustment. A natural first step would probably be the establishment of a new institution which might be called a Dynamic Department—Department of Co-ordination or a Department of Co-operation—the name is of little importance, but it would be the nucleus

of the new civilization, helping and protecting the people in such co-operative enterprises as agriculture, manufacturing, finance and distribution. . . .

“The outline of the plan is vague; it aims merely at being suggestive. Its principal purpose is to accentuate the imperative necessity of establishing a national time-binding agency—a Dynamic Department for stimulating, guiding and guarding the civilizing agencies, the wealth-producing agencies, the time-binding energies, in virtue of which human beings are human. For then and only then human welfare, unretarded by monstrous misconceptions of human nature, by vicious ethics, vicious economics and vicious politics, will advance peacefully, continuously, and rapidly, under the leadership of human engineering, happily and without fear, in accord with the exponential law—the *natural* law—of the time-binding energies of Man.”

James Harvey Robinson thinks that the history of thought furnishes the clue for which the world is searching. He tells us, in “The Mind in the Making,” that we must rely on Intelligence. For centuries organization has been tried, moral exhortation has been tried, and education has been tried. And they have all failed. Our hope lies in the application of Intelligence to social, political and economic problems with the same open-mindedness, courage and thoroughness with which it has been employed in the study of natural phenomena. It is fear, he says, that holds us back.

“If we are courageously to meet and successfully to overcome the dangers with which our civilization is threatened, it is clear that we need *more mind* than ever before. It is also clear that we can have indefinitely more mind than we already have if we but honestly desire it and avail ourselves of resources already at hand. Mind, as previously defined, is our ‘conscious knowledge and intelligence, what we know and our attitude toward it—our disposition to increase our information, classify it, criticize it, and apply it.’ It is obvious that in this sense the mind is a matter of accumulation and that it has been in the making ever since man took his first step in civilization. I have tried to suggest the manner in which man’s long history illuminates our plight and casts light on the path to be followed. And history is beginning to take account of the knowledge of man’s nature and origin contributed by the biologist and the anthropologist and the newer psychologists.”

Professor Robinson sketches the history of the human mind, treating, in his successive chapters, the savage mind, the beginning

of critical thinking in Greece, our mediaeval intellectual inheritance, and the scientific revolution of the last three hundred years. Every living man and woman, he contends, is a depository and epitome of all this past. "In all our reveries and speculations, even the most exacting, sophisticated, and disillusioned, we have three unsympathetic companions sticking closer than a brother and looking on with jealous impatience—our wild apish progenitor, a playful or peevish baby, and a savage. We may at any time find ourselves overtaken with a warm sense of camaraderie for any or all of these ancient pals of ours, and experience infinite relief in once more disporting ourselves with them as of yore. Some of us have in addition a Greek philosopher or man of letters in us; some a neoplatonic mystic, some a mediaeval monk, all of whom have learned to make terms with their older playfellows."

Exactly how we are to shake ourselves free from our hampering heritage Professor Robinson does not make clear. At least he has no concrete measures to urge. "I have no reforms to recommend, except the liberation of Intelligence, which is the first and most essential one." And again: "It is premature to advocate any wide-sweeping reconstruction of the social order, although experiments and suggestions should not be discouraged. What we need first is a change of heart and a chastened mood which will permit an ever-increasing number of people to see things as they are, in the light of what they have been and what they might be."

What, indeed, shall we do about it? Well, there is Intelligence! We can cut loose from "the trammels of the past." We can "endeavor manfully to free our own minds and then do what we can to hearten others to free theirs." We can "proceed to the thorough reconstruction of our mind, with a view to understanding actual human conduct and organization." Although this is the sum of the advice Professor Robinson is prepared to offer, he, for one, thinks it is highly inspiring.

Walter Lippmann also pins his faith, in "Public Opinion," to "the intelligence principle," but he comes at his conviction by a route of his own. With the aid of psychology he analyzes the news and the reactions of the mind to the news. He endeavors to demonstrate that the pictures in our heads fail to correspond with any degree of accuracy to the actual environmental world. We tend to throw all the information that reaches us into rigid stereotypes. Some of these stereotypes are loaded with preferences, according to our moral codes. We adjust ourselves to our codes and adjust

the facts that we see to that code. We have our blind spots; we are led astray by allegories. At any rate the facts elude us, though only the facts can set us free.

"It is because they (the people) are compelled to act without a reliable picture of the world, that governments, schools, newspapers and churches make such small headway against the obvious failings of democracy, against violent prejudice, apathy, preference for the curious trivial as against the dull important, and the hunger for sideshows and three-legged calves. This is the primary defect of popular government, a defect inherent in its traditions, and all its other defects can, I believe, be traced to this one."

Mr. Lippmann puts little reliance in current programs. "No electoral device, no manipulation of areas, no change in the system of property, goes to the root of the matter. You cannot take more political wisdom out of human beings than there is in them. And no reform, however sensational, is truly radical, which does not provide a way of overcoming the limitation of individual experience. There are systems of government, of voting, and representation which extract more than others. But in the end knowledge must come not from the conscience but from the environment with which that conscience deals. When men act on the principle of intelligence they go out to find their facts and to make their wisdom. When they ignore it, they go inside themselves and only find what is there. They elaborate their prejudice, instead of increasing their knowledge."

In this situation, Mr. Lippmann has a single suggestion of his own to offer. He would like to have intelligence sections attached at each of the Federal departments, and elsewhere, whose business it would be to ascertain the facts impartially and expertly, and publish them to the world. But he sets no great store even by this proposal. "It would be idle to deny that such a network of intelligence bureaus in politics and industry might become a dead weight and a perpetual irritation. One can easily imagine its attraction for men in search of soft jobs, for pedants, for meddlers." For "there are no fool-proof institutions." However, "if the analysis of public opinion and of democratic theories in relation to the modern environment is sound in principle, then I do not see how one can escape the conclusion that such intelligence work is the clue to betterment. I am not referring to the few suggestions contained in this chapter. They are merely illustrations. The task of working out the technique is in the hands of men trained to do it, and not

even they can today completely foresee the form, much less the details."

But this is not quite all, for "here, as in most other matters, 'education' is the supreme remedy." . . . "He (the teacher) can, by the use of the case method, teach the pupil the habit of examining the sources of his information. He can teach him, for example, to look in his newspaper for the place where the dispatch was filed, for the name of the correspondent, the name of the press service, the authority given for the statement, the circumstances under which the statement was secured. He can teach the pupil to ask himself whether the reporter saw what he describes, and to remember how that reporter described other events in the past. He can teach him the character of censorship, of the idea of privacy, and furnish him with knowledge of past propaganda. He can, by the proper use of history, make him aware of the stereotype, and can educate a habit of introspection about the imagery evoked by printed words. He can, by courses in comparative history and anthropology, produce a life-long realization of the way codes impose a special pattern upon the imagination. He can teach men to catch themselves making allegories, dramatizing relations, and personifying abstractions. He can show the pupil how he identifies himself with these allegories, how he becomes interested, and how he selects the attitude, heroic, romantic, economic which he adopts while holding a particular opinion. The study of error is not only in the highest degree prophylactic, but it serves as a stimulating introduction to the study of truth."

And here, encased in the elaborate armor of his skepticism, Mr. Lippmann leaves us.

The several books I have selected for inspection by no means exhaust the list, but they will serve, perhaps, to indicate the content of the new literature of approach. In this literature we find the same general ideas elaborated from several different angles. We find the same alarm at present conditions, the same insistence on the need of a fresh start, and the same lame and impotent conclusions. For the weakness of all these approaches to the social problem, through history, evolution, mathematics, psychoanalysis and what not, is that they remain only approaches. Their advocates exhaust themselves in explaining their points of view. These writers, when we meet them, bow graciously; they explain that we are surrounded by unprecedented dangers; and they promise that with their guidance we shall find a way out. They start off at a brisk pace, and we

follow them hopefully. They appear to be going somewhere. But their destination proves to be their starting point. They march around the social problem, pointing out various battlements in that hoary edifice; but into the problem itself they do not attempt to find an entrance.

On the perplexities of the present hour these vague philosophers do not shed a ray of light. It would be possible for two intelligent men, holding exactly opposite views on current issues, to read any one of these books and agree with it heartily, and still find their respective convictions undisturbed. Whether prohibition is a blessing or a blight, whether trade unionism is a social good or a social peril, whether Russia's experiment in communism should be encouraged or killed, whether the world war was a conspiracy by Germans or an explosion of European imperialism, whether America should cancel the Allied debts or press them—on these burning questions the advocates of enlightened approaches afford us no guidance. In fact, they appear consciously and timidly to skirt controversial issues. More important than this avoidance is the absence of any new synthesis, any new social concept, which will cut across the old alternatives and unlock the creative energies of mankind.

One wonders if H. G. Wells is not the originator and fountain head of this sort of discussion. For many years he has been stating the human problem in eloquent terms, and urging noble attitudes towards it. He did not even refrain from turning his "Outline of History" into a pamphlet and affixing to that huge shaft a little spear-head of social gospel. He achieved, it is true, only anticlimax. He is like a playwright who promises to show us a glimpse of the millenium, and then exhibits a backdrop on which is painted a pale suburban paradise, where mechanical marvels have sweetened work and abolished dirt, and where all human passion is dead. It would be much more candid to run mankind into the ditch, and leave it there.

There is, oddly enough, an evangelical strain in most of these writers. They exhort us, they ask of us a change of heart, or a change of spirit, and they stir in us pious resolves to lift our eyes and hearts. They draw heavily on underlying ethical assumptions which they do not pause to examine. Possibly the true prototype of this literature may be found in those books and tracts, common a decade or two ago, which sought to review social problems from the point of view of Christianity. These discussions often posed the question: "What would Jesus do?" The answer was, in general,

the application of more love, charity and good-will to the muddled affairs of men. It always remained a little vague and uncertain exactly what Jesus would do in some exigencies; for example, in a transportation strike, where love, charity and good-will are entirely lacking, or in a war, where love, charity and good-will are regarded as treasonous. But these books undoubtedly did a definite, if limited, good. In the particular persons who read them they released, for the time being, a kindlier attitude toward their fellow-man. And so this new literature of orientation carries a similar emotional release. The persons who read it are put, for the time being, in a more liberal and tolerant frame of mind. That constitutes at once its merit and its appeal.

But such is not the object to which the authors address themselves. They are, they say, aiming at the head, not the heart. They would transform our ideas. They profess not to be preachers but philosophers. If we meet them on that ground, we must pronounce a harsher judgment. Of what value to thinking is it to be swamped in a sea of pretentious phrases? "The liberation of intelligence," "the intelligence principle," "the science and art of human engineering," "time-binding capacity," "facing reality," "things as they are," "the real nature of Man." All this is jargon, for it lacks substance, and is linked with ludicrously puerile proposals. It is, in short, a new form of cant.

What the world needs and what the world thirsts for is not phrases and attitudes, not the right words to weave a spell, but a program: a program on which men can agree and which will lead them out of the wilderness. Professor Robinson has permitted himself to say, at one point in the book considered above, "We are in the midst of the greatest intellectual revolution that has ever overtaken mankind." That, unfortunately, is precisely what is not taking place. There is no great movement in the realm of ideas. We have no new illumination. The old liberalism is dead. Science remains what it has always been, a tool. The twentieth century is barren of great and creative ideas in politics, economics and sociology. For the time being we must get along as well as we can with the aid of our common sense.