

MECHANISM, LEISURE AND BEAUTY

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

SEVERAL years ago a leading American economist and educator of distinctly conservative leanings surprised many of his friends by declaring that the world needed more than anything else a new aristocracy, an aristocracy of men and women possessed of sufficient moral courage and genuine simplicity to dare practice the gospel of self-denial, modest living and high, serious thinking.

Now this thinker did not depreciate mechanism, invention, material progress, the wide diffusion of comfort and well-being. He did not suggest that telephones, motor cars, electric washing machines, wireless, ocean liners, etc., be voluntarily renounced for the sake of the better acquisitions of the spirit. What was important to him was *the personal attitude* toward comfort, convenience and luxury, the personal standard, the emotional reaction. He valued the example of dignity and simplicity in a world addicted to extravagance, display, excitement, bustle, speed, vulgarity.

It is certainly possible—nay, it is or should be easy—to be happy in a cottage sans telephones, automatic players, costly rugs, and the like, and to make one's life rich and full without automobiles, elaborate meals, expensive amusements. After all, there are no pleasures comparable to those derived from literature, music, pictures, natural beauty, meditation and contemplation. If the young do not appreciate these blessings, our educational system is at fault, and our social and domestic standards are equally at fault. What example do the middle-aged and mature set to the rising generation in respect of the use of leisure, the choice of amusements and recreation, the amount of time devoted to good books and reading aloud?

But we have been told lately that western society is morally and spiritually sick unto death—the death of civilization bequeathed by older and better ages—because it has formed and adopted a fatally wrong conception of progress and happiness. We have been told

that what ails Europe and America is their worship of mechanism, of activity, of industry and work. Individuals, the implication is, cannot escape their surroundings and atmosphere; they cannot isolate themselves and yet hope to influence their neighbors and friends. Reform, therefore, should begin, not with the individual, but with society as a whole, and the most essential of all reforms today is, forsooth, a deliberate rejection of the western ideal of progress which involves unremitting pursuit of improvements and labor-saving and time-saving devices, in favor of the eastern idea of cheerful acquiescence in things as they are, of contentment amid poverty and dreamy carelessness, of comparative idleness and stagnation.

Thus in a recent issue of *The Dial*, Mr. Bertrand Russell, in an indictment of western notions of progress, wrote as follows:

"Our social system, our prevailing habits of mind, and our so-called moral ideals are destructive of what is excellent. If excellence is to survive, we must become more leisurely, more just, less utilitarian and less 'progressive'. . . .

"Since I came to know China, I have come to regard 'progress' and 'efficiency' as the great misfortunes of the western world. But I have hopes of a laziness as a gospel. I think that if our education were strenuously directed to that end, . . . it might be possible to induce people to be lazy.

"The whole urgency of the modern business world is toward speeding up, greater efficiency, more intense international competition, when it ought to be toward more ease, less hurry and combination to produce goods for use rather than for profit."

Mr. Russell hopes, longs and works—works very hard, it may be added—for "a society which is stable as regards the material side of life and the methods of production; where industrialism has ceased to be competitive and is used to make life more leisurely instead of more strenuous."

The implication in Mr. Russell's whole argument is that "lazy" people, or people who appreciate leisure and actually enjoy it, are necessarily more just, more kindly, more disinterested, more peaceable and harmonious than strenuous, efficient and industrious people. But what evidence has he for this notion? There is no such evidence in the history of primitive and uncivilized tribes. People may be too lazy to fight, but they are not too lazy to harbor malice, envy, jealousy, suspicion and antipathy.

It may be conceded at once that civilized men would be better off if they had more leisure and knew how to use it beneficially. It is a

truism that we should work to live, not live to work. But what is meant by living? Staring into vacancy, sport and amusement to kill time, futile occupations to escape boredom are hardly to be extolled as the properties of abundant living. The thoughtful person desires leisure for the sake of study, reflection on the deeper problems of existence, communion with sages and seers, observations of nature and man, pursuit of esthetic satisfactions. The lazy individual is too lazy to think, to concentrate his mind, to wrestle with scientific and philosophical treatises, to listen attentively to good music, to sit through dramas, tragedies and comedies which require intellectual effort on the part of the auditors. The lazy individual has little, if any, curiosity or thirst for knowledge, and without such thirst there is no genuine culture, no rational human happiness.

No doubt Mr. Russell would explain that when he preaches the gospel of leisure and laziness, all he really means is that men and women ought to spend less time in factories, mines, mills, shops, counting-rooms, and the like, and more time in libraries, laboratories, art galleries, gardens, parks, woods, mountains, tennis courts, golf links, and sail or row boats. To this, however, the answer is two-fold. In the first place, mechanism is enabling the advanced industrial nations to do precisely that—to reduce the length of the work-day, to give the workers more holidays and half-holidays, to do away with the worst forms of drudgery, to increase wages and raise living standards. Mechanism reduces the danger of accidents in industry as well as the danger of contracting occupational disease. Mechanism has brought air and light into factories and mills, and has made miners relatively safe. Mechanism has put an end to rural and suburban isolation, and it is bringing country and city together. Mechanism abolishes slums and will abolish smoke, soot and dirt. According to eminent electrical engineers, in a few decades men will look back with amazement on what they will call the primitive and barbarous struggle for existence and decent comforts of the present period. A four-hour day will prevail; men and women will enjoy health, leisure and happiness, and back-breaking, monotonous, grinding toil will be unknown. Electricity and water power are expected to be the principal factors in thus transforming the world and with the aid of mechanism solving vexed social and moral problems.

Are these pictures too bright and too imaginative? Not if one reflect upon the effects already achieved by mechanism. Have American farmers more leisure or less since the invention of the

tractor, the cheap motor car, the telephone, the durable, hard-surfaced highways and byways? Would the modern forms of recreation—golf, country clubs, tennis, travel—be feasible without mechanism? Has not mechanism made the best books, the best music and the best periodicals and newspapers accessible to all? Has not mechanism averted revolution by facilitating emigration and redistribution of surplus population? These questions answer themselves.

In the second place, and granting, purely for the sake of the argument, that mechanism has not increased leisure, but, on the contrary, has emphasized the false gospel of work, speed and efficiency, how does it follow that mechanism is *necessarily* incompatible with the true gospel of leisure and the joy of life? Admitting that mechanism has not been properly used, must one also admit that it *cannot possibly be so used* in the future? Would it not be infinitely easier to popularize in the West the gospel of the right and enlightened use of mechanism than to induce the business world to adopt a policy of stagnation and inaction in respect of the processes and methods of production and distribution? Take the average employer and consider which of the following two courses he would rather pursue—give up invention and research, refrain from further improving his plant and product, in order that he and his employes may turn their attention to leisure and its problems, or continue to seek and make improvements, cheapen production costs, extend markets, and at the same time share his profits with labor and help it translate mechanism into leisure and elevated pleasure? Or ask the average mechanic or skilled workman the question whether he would be willing to renounce progressivism and labor-saving machinery in the hope of reaping some benefit from a cycle of Cathay in the restless West or whether he prefers to continue his efforts at betterment with the aid of mechanism and ever-increasing industrial resources.

It is true that in the past, trade unions have opposed the introduction of labor-saving and time-saving machinery, but that policy is now repudiated in the home of its former champions. Trade unions and labor organs no longer openly oppose machinery. Many of them are quite sincere in protesting their interest in efficiency and all proper means of increasing production and creating abundance.

But, it may be asked—indeed certain moralists and philosophers, including Mr. Russell, have asked—whether it is wise to increase further the discrepancy that exists between mechanism and material progress, on the one hand, and social and individual morality on the

other. The material environment of civilized man has, it is said with truth, changed much faster than human nature, and intellectual advance without a corresponding advance in character and virtue may be fatal to civilization. Can we safely continue to arm man with terrible weapons while he remains covetous, envious, jealous, malicious and greedy? Can we safely encourage the love of wealth, power and luxury, seeing that the pursuit of these objectives leads to fratricidal strife, to sanguinary warfare between classes, nations and groups of nations? Should not western society proclaim a sort of truce, or holiday, or vacation, or strike against invention and progressivism, or the gospel of speeding up and strenuous living, in order to give the soul or spirit of man a chance to catch up with material conquests?

There are several answers to the foregoing queries. In the first place, the suggestion of a suspension or cessation of invention in the mechanical and industrial sphere is idle and Utopian. The West cannot help being what it is; it cannot change its nature; it cannot stop thinking, planning, contriving improvements. Why preach the impossible?

In the second place, there is no reason to believe that the period of suspension, the truce, would be utilized for the purpose intended by those who propose it—catching up. It might be spent far less worthily,—for example, in quarreling about the wealth and treasure already accumulated. The quarrels might even be more violent than they have been under unchecked industrialism and triumphant mechanism.

Finally, it is an obvious fallacy to imply that further progress of mechanism must necessarily increase the discrepancy between material and moral assets of civilized man, or between intelligence and character. Mechanism is not always or entirely destructive. It arms the "blond beast," it also arms the spiritual, the socialized, the "godlike" self. We hear more about poison gas, war in the air, submarines, than we do about life-saving and health-saving appliances, about medical and surgical discoveries, preventatives of disease, of accidents, of premature death. But science and applied science have done as much good as harm, if not more good than harm.

No, there is no need of a cessation of invention and improvement in the material sphere. There is no occasion for a gospel of idleness and laziness. The need is for a gospel of national living, of a balanced existence of work and pleasure, of hard thinking and passive enjoyment, of high seriousness and wholesome fun and sport. There

is need for a gospel of beauty in conduct and in art, a gospel of simplicity and dignity based on a sound appraisal of values. There is nothing new in such a gospel, but it *sounds* new to millions. For this fact, radical reformers are largely responsible. They have assumed that the modern industrial system is inimical to a sound philosophy of life, to appreciation of beauty, of pure and abstract science, of free and cheerful existence. They have assumed that the present industrial order condemns men to misery, gloom and despair. They have assumed that competition in trade, commerce and the professions is incompatible with sociability, with good will, with spontaneous co-operation in any field of endeavor whatever. They have assumed that competitive industry, *as such*, is subversive of all that is wholesome and excellent in modern civilization.

For none of these assumptions is there any warrant in reason, logic or fact. Competition in the material sphere can be made as safe and beneficial as it admittedly is in the intellectual and artistic spheres. No one proposes to make men happier than they are by doing away with competition among educators, inventors, philosophers, historians, essayists, critics, artists. Given certain fundamental conditions—free access to natural opportunities, fair play, equal freedom—and industrial competition also ceases to be pernicious and demoralizing. The trouble with society is not competition, but privilege, artificial monopoly, lack of opportunity for millions. Individuals and nations may compete for business without hating or disliking one another, and without forcing one another to sacrifice life, health and joy to mere wealth. The "pace that kills" in industry and trade is not imposed by competition as a principle; it is the result of false standards and false conceptions of life. Men might establish co-operative industries by the thousand and yet continue to practice efficiency for efficiency's sake and mistake means for ends. It is an extraordinary fact that many thinkers adopt the doctrine of historic materialism, or the purely economic interpretation of human life, without knowing or suspecting it.

The economic and industrial problems are very real and very serious, but they are far from being the only important problems civilized man has to solve, or is endeavoring to solve. There are the problems of religion, of ethics, of esthetics. They are but superficially affected by mechanism and by industrial systems. The men and women who do not ask themselves what the meaning of life is, what our place in the universe is, what our destiny is, of what stuff

the world is made, what we know and can know of truth and beauty, of good and evil, are scarcely civilized.

Many may feel that religious, ethical and esthetic research, no matter how prolonged, will but lead them to skepticism and Agnosticism. One hears among the young of today the expression, "I am an Agnostic in morals, art and politics as well as in religion." But it is one thing to say this after much earnest study, reflection and exploration, and another thing to say it lightly, flippantly, ignorantly. After all, the deepest and worthiest of all gospels is that of untiring truth-seeking, unceasing pursuit of knowledge and understanding, cultivation and enjoyment of the sublime and beautiful.