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THE DILEMMA OF THE LIBERAL

by

Dorothy Thompson

THE consciousness that I live in a revolutionary world is the central fact in my life. I go to sleep and I awake thinking of the world in which I live. My whole personal life has become in a profound sense of secondary importance, and indeed, it, so immediate and so practical, is the part which is dream-like and unreal, and the other, more remote, touching me personally so little, is the imminent, the overwhelming reality. At the center of what I *know* is the realization and the acceptance of the certainty that never in my lifetime will I live again in the world in which I was born and grew to maturity. Yet in its purely personal forms it is not so unlike my mother's. My husband and my child, my home, my friends, engross the major part of all my time. I keep house in a bourgeois way: I travel and amuse myself, I see the latest plays and hear the oldest music. I have a profession, a *metier*, in which I am not unsuccessful. But.

Whether I plant a garden, or decorate and refurnish a room; whether I give a party, telling the cook we will have this or that to eat and there will be so and so many guests; whether I choose a hat or a string of beads, or a school for my child, or a book to read; whether I sit at the typewriter and work, a preoccupation engrosses me; and apprehension. This life which you lead, a voice says to me continually, is in the deepest sense senseless; a repetition of social gestures, somehow hollow; it ties to nothing, it is part of nothing. It is a dream, and the reality lies elsewhere. There are people about me whom I love—tenderly and furiously. Yet something comes between us. What comes between us is the whole of society. This nucleus, myself, my husband, my child, the people dependent upon us and our friends, should somehow tie up and be part of a larger collective life, be integrated with it through and through. My parents' life was. They were adjusted to themselves and to society. But the security of our world stops at our doorstep.

"I am wounded in my fundamental societal impulses," cried a man of genius, of my generation, in a burst of agony. What D. H. Lawrence felt, I feel, continually, overwhelmingly. It is not enough to say that he was an ill man and we are both neurotics. Or rather, this neuroticism, if it be such, is epidemic. Life has treated me on the whole, very well. Many people, I know, envy me. I have no financial worries, my work is recognized, in my opinion, beyond its deserts; my personal cares are not abnormal. Yet I am filled with a profound distaste

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for this world; and distaste, indignation, pity, horror, and apprehension are continual emotions. My father, who was an evangelical clergyman, would have said I needed to get right with God, and this is doubtless a symbolical statement of the truth, God, even in my father's eyes, being the spiritual force moving the universe. He would have described the state I am in as one of "conviction of sin." And there again, I would agree with him, though not with his therapeutics. I am in search of a living faith in which to believe, and a body of faith to which to belong. I want to help create, in order to live in a society with which I am intellectually and emotionally reconciled. I cannot bear this world! "I am wounded in my fundamental societal impulses!"

Now, all this would be something to tell to a priest or a psychoanalyst were it merely a personal reaction. I am giving publicity to my symptoms only because they are endemic, I believe, to the largest section of western intellectuals. To be sure, my own case has some exaggerated features. I have undergone a direct major shock. Three years ago I saw a world collapse in front of my eyes, a world where I was much at home, a country whose fate touched me nearly. That was Germany. When, later, the guns were turned against the Vienna Social Democrats, and destroyed the only society I have seen since the war which seemed to promise evolution toward a more decent, humane, and worthy existence in which the past was integrated with the future, real fear overcame me, and now never leaves me. In one place only I had seen a New Deal singularly intelligent, remarkably tolerant, and amazingly successful. It was destroyed precisely because it was insufficiently ruthless, insufficiently brutal. "Victory" (I saw) requires force to sustain victory. I had wanted victory, and peace.

The triumph of National Socialism in Germany was another matter. I was never an ardent admirer of the German Republic, or of the German Social Democracy. It too lacked brutality but also it lacked simple moral courage. There was not a man in it who could measure up in character and intellect to the greater Vienna leaders. It compromised with the most capitalistic-speculative forces, and finally dug its own grave and appointed its own executioners. In theory orthodox and didactic, in practice it was compromising and poor-spirited, and the more vigorous spirits were leaving it behind long before it finally passed out.

In and out of Germany from 1924 to 1933, closely in touch with the intellectual movements of that epoch, I was aware that revolution was imminent—some sort of revolution. The cerebral activity was prodigious. The conviction that fundamental and radical change was inevitable, was practically universal amongst all the younger people.

In those days I first encountered communism as a real movement. Brought up, as I have been, in an age of skepticism and enquiry and a tradition of libertarianism, its rigid orthodoxy offended me then as it does now. Then, as now, I felt that there were vast forces in the world undreamed of in their philosophy. I could not swallow Marxism whole nor yield the program blind obedience. Definitely to limit one's outlook, to subject one's intellect and will seemed to me then—as now—not progressive but reactionary. The glorification of "the workers," by which was meant the urban industrial proletariat, ascribing to them exceptional virtues, coincided with no reality which I knew. Yet I saw all around me, repeated in relation to communism, the phenomenon which in my evangelical childhood, I had often observed: conversion. Men were overtaken on the way to Damascus, saw a great light, and thereafter were changed personalities.

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Unconvinced as was my intellect by communism, I was immensely moved by communists. They shared a living faith, embodied in an accepted creed, binding them to the future and to each other. Their scholasticistic hair-splitting over what seemed to an outsider trivial matters was not trivial to them because the doctrine and the faith was at the very center of their living. I, whom individualism and skepticism had set adrift in a world where everything was challenged and nothing believed, was drawn to these taut young people almost enviously.

To *belong* to something! Isn't that a universal wish? To be one of the brethren? To be one of a fold? To what does one belong today? Nearly fifty per cent of the people of the United States "belong" to churches, but for how many is the church more than a bridge club? Where is it a real fellowship of sharing, materially and spiritually? Who would die for Christianity? Does one belong to one's family? I was married and divorced by the time I was thirty. My parents were dead, but had they not been, the patriarchal home of the past had long since been destroyed, in any case. The family is no longer a tribe. Among these German communists I felt a *moral* atmosphere superior in many ways to any which I had hitherto encountered. They had a stripped and dedicated courage, a holy grail to be pursued, and a vision which did not flinch to consider the goal a hundred years off.

More and more in this Germany of yesterday, as it shook with revolutionary tremors, I felt that the attack was being launched not so much at the capitalistic system as such, but against the whole complex of bourgeois values. Distaste for these values was characteristic of the rich as well as the poor. In the period of great speculative activity and attendant (however ephemeral) prosperity, men

built themselves luxurious palaces, laid out gardens, swilled champagne in night clubs, yet displayed inner revulsion. Millionaires, in moments when they gave themselves away, often expressed a longing for a cottage in the country; "to get away from it all," was a commonly expressed desire, "all" meaning apparently the prevailing way of life.

The relations between men and women were strained and uneasy. Material conditions among most middle-class people made the traditional form of family life impossible. Women had to go out to work, and achieving a measure of economic independence took sexual independence also, encouraged in this by a misreading of the implications of psychoanalysis, which distorted by laymen and fools, profoundly helped to upset conventions. Since even in married love, there was no security, men tended to seek the company of men for deep companionship, and a sort of fetish of masculinity arose. In its crasser aspects it resolved into the open practice and open justification of homosexuality, with clubs and publications for the frankly inverted.

More significant were its unconscious manifestations, the growing cult of masculine youth, the emphasis on manly fellowship. The erotic content of National Socialism in a time of such sexual confusion is surely one not unimportant explanation of its extraordinary spread. For it emphasized masculine beauty, masculine companionship, masculine values, masculine love, relegating woman to the position of breeder. That it eventually turned against its own homosexual leaders and began a furious purge of open invert practices is beside the point. It divided love into heavenly and earthly varieties, the earthly love being reserved for women, the heavenly for the Leader. In this it was in sharpest contrast to communism, which sought a re-integration between spiritual, if not functional, equals, in relation to an egalitarian society. National Socialism appealed strongly to many women of strong physical na-

tures and almost invariably awakened the conscious or unconscious aversion of those women for whom love can be expressed only in terms of the whole personality.

Yet, it was not at all difficult to understand the appeal of National Socialism in those chaotic days. The Nazi emotion and the communist were not so far apart. Less vigorous minds hovered between the two or drifted from one to the other. The Left Wing of the Nazis was nearer to the communist than to any bourgeois group. When Otto Strasser left the movement after a long conversation with Hitler and published the interview in a brochure "Ministerial Power or Revolution?" he spoke for the revolutionary Nazi, who is not extirpated yet. The Nazi movement no less than the communist was a revolt against existing society, the cry of a whole generation, "we are wounded in our fundamental societal impulses," a demand to be recognized, to become part of a united order, to march with leadership toward some visible goal.

That the goal toward which they marched themselves with lifted chins and shining eyes, is likely to be death, is tragedy.

The experience, for an American onlooker, unable to espouse either cause was shattering. If I could not accept the communist doctrine, still less could I accept the Nazi, with its Aryan heresy, its militarism, its anachronistic emphasis on nationalism and autarchy. Yet I share the discontent with existing society which made both movements possible. I cannot read half the newspapers or see the average Hollywood film without feeling ever so little like a Nazi, or observe the irresponsible antics of some of the rich, without feeling like a communist.

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FIRSTS: *New Authors and Their First Books*

by

Horace Gregory

Where The Weak Grow Strong by Eugene Armfield. *Covici Friede.* \$2.50. Nov. 24.

The New Caravan edited by Alfred Kreyborg, Lewis Mumford & Paul Rosenfeld. *W. W. Norton.* \$3.95. Nov. 15.

New Writing edited by John Lehmann. *John Lane: The Bodley Head.* London.

THE hero of Eugene Armfield's first book is Tuttle, North Carolina, home of the Acme Chair Manufacturing Company, population 5,000. The time is from July to October in the year 1912. Early morning July is first shown, then afternoon in August, then a September Saturday night, then an "Everybody's Day," a town-boosting holiday, the second Friday in October. To the naked eye there is no visible plot, no story, and it is only at second glance that a theme looms in the background, and, perhaps, a moral. We see the town wake up and move slowly to work, its alarm clock the early morning train, then after the noise of the train recedes in distance, the first pale, hot rays of the sun uncover segments of Tuttle's five thousand population: men and their wives in bed or at hasty breakfast, children at later breakfast, the business of a summer's day begun. It has been discovered that a girl eloped with a young man, and the news of the elopement spread through town, but it is soon clear that the actual importance of Tuttle lies in its lack of momentous incident; its heroic gestures are lost in the dim memories of the Civil War, and its ugly, grimy present tense of 1912 reflects the drab coloring of small

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