

The American "Lag"

Those advancing the flight from reality had great difficulty in launching America. The fact has not been sufficiently appreciated. When writers note that Americans did not rush to adopt ameliorative reforms as avidly as Europeans, the matter is often treated as the "social lag" of Americans. Americans "lagged" more than fifty years behind Germans in providing certain kinds of "insurance" programs for workers. Americans "lagged" many years behind England in providing old-age pensions, and some several years in empowering labor unions. Contrariwise, France is far ahead of the United States in rent controls (and in housing shortages), and England is much further along the road to completely socialized medicine.

The matter can and should be described in quite different terms. Americans held out against the lure of utopia, the promises of reformers, the blandishments of revolutionaries much longer than many Europeans. Reform, when it came to America, was more moderate and mild than in most European countries, and did not so drastically alter the existing situation. Still, it has come, and the gradualness of the movement has obscured for many Americans the import of it.

There were tremendous obsta-

cles to the triumph of reformism in America. The institutions, traditions, habits, and beliefs of Americans ran counter to the outlook and practices associated with ameliorative reform. But, the casual observer might object, on these grounds reformism should have come much more readily to America than to Europe. No country was more deeply locked in age-old ways than Russia. The British tradition was hoary with age before America was an adolescent. Surely, America was more flexible than bureaucrat-ridden France, the American more amenable to reform than the Slavic peasant. Besides, the governments in America were generally more responsive to the populace than in Europe.

The greatest weakness in these objections is a misunderstanding of how reformism has been advanced, and by whom. If the "people" had originated and advanced ameliorative reform, it should have come very early to America. Traditions and customs in America were not so firmly fixed as in many countries. On the other hand, popular government was much better provided for in America than in most countries. To blame governmental intervention and security programs upon democracy, however, is to confuse effect with cause. Undoubtedly, there are now many people who

have vested interests in certain governmental programs, and there are many others who have accepted the notion that their prosperity is due to the efforts of politicians. But these are effects, not causes, though they do contribute to the continued feasibility of politicians advancing ameliorative reform. Reforms were and are advanced by *intellectuals* (and their satraps among the bureaucracy). In any country where there was a moderately enlightened electorate, it has taken many years of vigorous activity to get a majority for reforms of any great dimensions. The experience of reformers in England and America should give ample evidence for this statement.²

Drastic social reforms were introduced most readily in Russia, Germany, and Italy. It was the work of intellectuals, or pseudo-intellectuals. These were countries without a lengthy experience in popular governments, but countries within which tradition was strong. But the intellectuals were — as they have tended to be increasingly everywhere — disaffect-

² There is, of course, a demonstrable corollary between universal suffrage and the triumph of reformism in many countries. And reformers have been eager proponents of universal suffrage. The significance of this is not far to seek: the illiterate, unpropertied, and politically inexperienced succumb more readily than does a limited electorate to the promises of reformers.

ed from the tradition. Not only was tradition without effective spokesmen quite often, but also the populace was inexperienced in defending it.

Stabilizing Influences

In America, things were quite different. The United States Constitution had been formed by the leading thinkers in America. Much of the political tradition had taken shape in the historical memory of much of the populace. The traditions had been freely formed, for the most part, and had the support of intellectuals for most of the nineteenth century. Americans revered their institutions, took pride in them, were accustomed to thinking of them as the best in the world.

Equally important as an obstacle to reform was the character of American institutions. The United States Constitution — and probably most state constitutions — is a conservative document. That is, the government which it provides for makes change difficult to accomplish. For a bill to become law it must be passed by a majority of the House of Representatives, a majority of the Senate, and signed by the President. Even then, it may be nullified by the courts as being unconstitutional. The Constitution can, of course, be amended, but amendments must