Capitalist Decay Stifles Progress

By LEWIS COREY

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IT may seem strange to speak of a cultural crisis in America when every one is anxious about the economic crisis that now prevails in our country. But the two crises are related to one another. How closely they are related may become clear when I say that to me culture is something different from that rare and precious thing whose appreciation is limited to a small elite.

Culture is a part of social living. There is no truly great culture unless it draws within itself increasingly larger masses of the people. Culture is truly great where all people may work in dignity and security, live in peace and fraternity with one another; where they are not frustrated by barriers of privilege and caste and where they may all aspire to continuously finer ways of living. Culture is greater where man is free than where he is a slave, where there is democracy instead of oligarchy, where there is peace instead of war.

Achievements Of Capitalism

One of the greatest of all cultural achievements was the Enlightenment of the earlier stages of capitalism in the 18th century—the Enlightenment that preached faith in man, faith in reason, faith in progress. All that is creative in modern culture is closely linked to the faith of the Enlightenment.

That faith in man, in reason, in progress was most highly realized in the America of a hundred years ago. In a new world freed from the tyranny of the old, all things seemed possible and aspiration was unbounded. There was measurable economic equalitarianism in the form of widespread ownership of small productive property. Political inequality was destroyed and democracy was the great ideal. Opportunity appeared unlimited. The right to education was granted to all, and education meant the fulfillment of equality, the democratic solution of social problems, the creative realization of new and higher ways of life. Peace and progress everlasting were considered possible in a new world that was not oppressed by monarchical despotism.

Whatever one may think of that earlier culture, it was animated by faith in man and no truly great culture can arise without that faith.

The promise of that earlier culture was only partly fulfilled. For the masses of our people were converted into propertyless dependents on the property of a small minority. Political democracy was increasingly limited by increasing economic inequality. The masters of great wealth acquired the culture of artificial social graces and of museums in their homes, but the democratic culture of the masses was restricted. Yet aspiration remained and the hope of greater progress.

Capitalism An Obstacle Today

Today, aspiration and progress are threatened by the permanent economic crisis of capitalism. Men today cannot aspire freely because they are oppressed by increasing unemployment and economic insecurity. The hope of greater progress is menaced by interests which progress would destroy.

The economic crisis creates a new and wholly unnecessary poverty at a moment when we possess all the technical and economic means for the final abolition of poverty. Economic opportunity is limited. Education is threatened because there are scores of thousands of unemployed youth coming out of our colleges; girls and boys trained to do a particular job and unable to get the chance to work at the job. If work cannot be provided for our educated youth, there must come a reaction against education. The economic crisis multiplies discontent among the dispossessed masses of our people and, since democracy gives that discontent a chance to express itself, there is a growing reaction against democracy among the ruling class. The great ideals of democracy and equality are rejected. Consider the words of one influential American educator: "Democracy minimizes distinctions of worth, idealizes the mass, flatters the man in the street." That educator makes a mockery of the ideals of education and urges the erection of new barriers of caste.

Hence, the economic crisis threatens all that is democratic and progressive in our culture; still worse, the crisis threatens to stifle

(*Continued on Page* 5)

Genius As al Leader

and similar institutions must be regarded as organs of insurrection, as organs of revolutionary power. 5. The social content of the impending revolution in Russia can only be the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry. . . . 6. The task of the proletariat of Russia is to complete the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia in order to kindle the socialist revolution in Europe. The second has now become extremely close to the first; nevertheless, it still remains a second and separate task, for it is a question of the different classes that are collaborating with the proletariat of Russia; for the first task, the collaborators are the petty-bourgeois peasantry of Russia; for the second, it is the proletariat of other countries."

One thing is clear: the classical Bolshevik scheme contemplated a socialist revolution in Russia only as a third stage, following a socialist revolution in Western Europe, which itself would follow a bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia.

Then came 1917 and the February revolution. The Bolshevik leaders in Russia—Stalin and Kamenev, in the first place—conducted their policy on the basis of this scheme, which to them meant that the basic task of the moment was for the "revolutionary democracy" (proletariat and radical petty bourgeoisie) to complete the bourgeois-democratic revolution, with no thought of socialism for which Russia was obviously not yet "ripe" and which would become a possibility only after the triumph of socialism in Western Europe. This orientation brought the Bolsheviks very close to the Left Mensheviks and, indeed, there was a movement, supported by Stalin, for the fusion of the two "factions" of social-democracy.

On April 16, Lenin returned to Russia from his long exile. Even before setting foot on Russian soil, he had given deep thought to the rapidly developing Russian situation and had formulated his conceptions in remarkably clear form in his series of "Letters from Afar." Now that he was back, he presented his views, on April 17, in his famous "April theses" before a

(*Continued on Page* 5)

CAPITALISM IN DECAY STIFLES PROGRESS

(*Continued from Page* 3)
all efforts to move onward to new and higher cultural levels. Reaction scoffs at progress for progress now threatens its interests.

Housing vs. Armaments

Most dangerous of all cultural threats is the growing menace of war. Modern warfare, with its horrifying efficient weapons of destruction, may destroy the whole fabric of our civilization and its culture. War lets loose the most savagely reactionary passions; it may mean the coming of the black night of fascism and cultural death.

The economic crisis drives toward American rearmament as a means of increasing economic activity, and increasing armaments is one factor driving toward war.

We must raise economic activity and provide work. We can do that, for the time being, thru a great government program of subsidized low-cost housing. The majority of our people cannot afford to rent or buy new homes; 15,000,000 American families now inhabit homes that are unfit to live in. Let us provide homes and jobs for workers. Let us rebuild the country and so raise the levels of economic activity. If business cannot do the housing job, and it cannot, let society do it thru the government.

But the very people who favor government spending on armaments are opposed to government spending on low-cost housing. Why should they favor one and oppose the other? The economics are the same in both cases. In both cases the government must spend, the government must borrow and tax; in both cases, the mass-production industries are stimulated and the levels of economic activity are raised. But housing is constructive and armaments are destructive. Government spending on housing strengthens the progressive labor forces of the nation; armaments breed militarism and reaction and provide means for the stifling of discontent, while profits are piled up for the magnates of finance.

In cultural and human terms, there is only one choice. Let us use our economic resources for the constructive purposes of peace and not for the destructive purposes of war, for progress and not reaction, for life and not death.

If culture shrinks from the great social problems of our age, it will ensure its own death. You cannot separate the cultural from the social. You cannot solve the cultural crisis without solving the economic crisis, for they are inseparable.

And bear in mind that the cultural crisis has two aspects, that it represents a struggle between reactionary and progressive forces. The cultural crisis in America may end in cultural decay; but it may also end in a new and higher culture.

All that is progressive in our culture is threatened and we must defend it against such dangers. But a purely defensive struggle is not enough. We must set in motion a larger struggle to use all that is progressive in our culture to move onward to higher levels, which means moving toward a new social order. That new order is socialism. Let us consider its concrete meaning in terms of what we can agree upon as being socially desirable aims.

Necessity Of Socialism

It is socially desirable to insure economic security to all by mastering our economic system in a rational and planful manner. Today, our inability to provide work for millions of people, while there exist all the means and purposes of working, shows that we are not masters of our economic system but rather its slaves.

It is socially desirable to increase our output of goods and services, to release the abundance that industry is now capable of producing It is madness to produce less when we can produce more.

It is socially desirable to increase leisure—not the degrading leisure of unemployment but the creative leisure of fewer hours and days of working. We have the technical, economic and natural resources, the organization and the skill, to produce an increasing amount of goods and services with a decreasing amount of labor.

It is socially desirable to increase education. As long as higher learning is the monopoly of the few, they have the power to oppress the many. We should give our youth a higher education, give it to all our young people—not simply for professional purposes—but for purposes of understanding, to make it possible for all the people to act more intelligently on the great problems that face them.

It is socially desirable to have more democracy, to destroy all barriers of privilege and caste, instead of constantly erecting new barriers. That is possible thru economic democracy, thru the freedom that comes from economic liberty and security and the independence and understanding that comes from greater leisure and education.

In a word, it is socially desirable to ensure peace and progress.

I think we can agree on all those socially desirable objectives. Knit them together and they are the basis of a new social order that moves beyond capitalism to the economic democracy of socialism.

The cultural crisis in America tests our faith in man, our faith in reason, our faith in progress. It is that faith that animates the labor movement and the millions of manual and salaried workers organized within its ranks. The American labor movement of the 1830's was a great force in the struggle for political democracy. Now that labor movement is the great force working for the economic and social democracy that will create a finer culture because it fulfills more fully our faith in man, our faith in reason, our faith in progress.

"The Communist Party has adopted the entire program of liberalism except its saving grace of tolerance."
—Jennie Lee, well-known English socialist.

Bare Child Labor Fraud

(*Continued from Page* 1)
it cries out against the danger of child labor." Closing the debate, N. M. Minkoff, head of the A.L.P. delegation, pointed out that, on this question, the labor movement is completely united, both the C.I.O. and the State Federation of Labor having gone on record against the Nunan-Moffat resolution.

The Wheeler-Johnson bill outlaws interstate transportation of goods manufactured by child labor —but it provides for no inspections and no control at the place of manufacture. With the difficulty of identifying goods made by child labor, except at the point of production, enforcement would be little more than a cruel joke.

The perpetrators of this hoax would have liked to remain anonymous but, upon the vigorous demand of the Laborites, a roll call was held in which all the A.L.P.ers, eight Democrats and four Republicans voted against.