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The Price of Radicalism

Randolph Bourne

1916

The Pillar of Fire, by Seymour Deming. Boston:
Small, Maynard and Co. \$1.00 net.

Mr. Seymour Deming follows his eloquent *Message to the Middle Class* with an assault upon the colleges. His book he calls “a profane baccalaureate,” and it rips along as from one who is overturning the altars of Baal. No one has a style quite like this, with its mixture of Greek classicism and Broadway slang, with its cheap sardonic kicks and its sudden flashes of insight. Mr. Deming moves you, but he leaves you in the end more entertained than persuaded. His prophetic fire is so much fire and so little light. The first part of the book is devoted to picturesque denunciation of the colleges for not training a man to make a living. The second glorified the radical as the man who scorns success, and has turned from everything which the world thinks of value. Such logic dims the force of his blast.

I quite agree with Mr. Deming that the object of an education is to know a revolution when you see one. Colorado, Calumet, and West Virginia should make the college sky much more lurid than they do. But something more is needed for this “class unconscious of class-consciousness” than clarion calls

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summoning it to be radical. Mr. Deming has too much of the martyr-complex. He talks as if the radical of today occupied the position of social outlawry that the Abolitionist of 1850 occupied. To be radical, he says, is to be thrust out of the society of cultivated men, and to seek one's companionship among the meek and lowly. He speaks too always as if this little group of early Christians living in catacombs were all of the saintliest breed, the foolish who have confounded the sayings of the wise. Most of us used to believe both of these things. But most of us have given up looking on ourselves as heroes and martyrs because we blaspheme the "property-god of Things-As-They-Are." We have climbed out of the catacombs, and we find many radicals disillusioning. We have either grown up or the world has moved on.

The real trouble with middle-class radicalism in this country today is that it is too easy. It is becoming too popular. It is not the heroic abnegation which Mr. Deming pictures, but something which almost anybody can encompass. The ranks are full of the unfocused and the unthinking. Let the college man or girl who listens to Mr. Deming's sermon join the Intercollegiate Socialist Society or some similar institution, and discover how discouragingly respectable they are. The only way by which middle-class radicalism can serve is by being fiercely and concentratedly intellectual. This is something which these organizations have so far failed to do. The labor movement in this country needs a philosophy, a literature, a constructive socialist analysis and criticism of industrial relations. How very far even the most intelligent accredited representatives of labor are still from such a goal is shown by the Manly report. Labor will scarcely do this thinking for itself. Unless middle-class radicalism threshes out its categories and interpretations and undertakes this constructive thought it will not be done. Mr. Deming must add to his message of fire the clear cold determination to be intolerably intellectual.

Given the prophetic fire, the young middle-class radical to whom Mr. Deming appeals should be able to find himself in an intellectual movement which is struggling to clarify its ideas and use them as tools for turning up the layers and interpreting the changes in the social world about them. Intellectual radicalism should not mean repeating stale dogmas of Marxism. It should not mean "the study of socialism." It had better mean a restless, controversial criticism of current ideas, and a hammering out of some clear-sighted philosophy that shall be this pillar of fire. The young radical today is not asked to be a martyr, but he is asked to be a thinker, an intellectual leader. So far as the official radicals deprecate such an enterprise they make their movement sterile. Yet how often when attempts are made to group radicals on an intellectual basis does not some orthodox elder of the socialist church arise and solemnly denounce such intellectual snobbishness. Let these young men and women, he will say, go down into the labor unions and the socialist locals and learn of the workingman. Let them touch the great heart of the people. Let them put aside their university knowledge and hear that which is revealed unto babes. Only by humbly working up through the actual labor movement will the young radical learn his job. His intellectualism he must disguise. The epithet "intellectual" must make him turn pale and run.

And so this middle-class radicalism tends to drift, destitute of intellectual light. The pugnacious thinkers who want to thrash things out find themselves labelled heterodox and esoteric. There is little controversy because nobody will quarrel about ideas. The workers must not be offended and the movement must not be split. The young radical soon learns to be ashamed of his intellectual bias, and after an ineffectual effort to squeeze himself into the mind of the workingman drifts away disillusioned from his timid collegiate radicals. His energy evaporates, because intellectual radicalism was afraid to be itself.

Mr. Deming ignores this practical postlude to his challenges. The pillar of fire was not an exciting alarm but a guide which led the way toward the Promised Land. A cloud by day, its mission by night was to give forth not heat but light. Just so far as such messages as Mr. Deming's are real pillars of fire they are the needfullest we could have.