

Men - Machines - Mexico

by Bertram D. Wolfe

MEXICO, by Stuart Chase. The Macmillan Company. New York, 1931.

Life under capitalism in imperialist America is spiritually and physically depressing. The machine under the profit system turns out an overwhelming flood of trashy things, of shoddy ware, adulterated products, things intrinsically ugly. Life is bleak, harsh, cruel and colorless. Its law is the law of the jungle (with apologies to the jungle). Until the depression, to the superficial observer, it remained outwardly fair. The crisis came like a knife cutting into the rotten peel and showing the goodly apple core at the core. Hence the American intellectual has become restless.

He is no longer sure whether he believes in "rugged individualism". He is no longer sure whether he believes in the myth of prosperity. He doubts the profit motive as an adequate incentive to human society. He doubts Henry Ford and mass production. He doubts Hoover and engineering. He doubts Rockefeller and philanthropy. He is frightened by the machine, and no longer knows whether it is a boon or a curse. The billion odd horsepower developed by the three leading electrical nations suddenly appears to him like a horrible nightmare, "A Billion Wild Horses" on a stampede threatening to trample the life out of mankind.

Terrified, he turns questioningly to Soviet Russia where they are building planned economy and mastering the machine; or to Mexico or India where they are vainly, but to his superficial view successfully, evading the machine. He looks longingly towards Mexico where medieval handicraft and fiesta, color and popular arts, still prolong their bright

but moribund existence. How he wishes he might "go native" with the Mexicans—not really of course, but second hand, vicariously, as a sort of a vacation.

It was in such a mood that Stuart Chase visited Mexico. "Having just completed two moderately exhausting if not exhaustive studies of life in the machine age, ... I wanted to rest and I wanted to see" the paintings of Diego Rivera and the land where there is "no time sense", i.e. no modern capitalism. (From the "forward")

A First-Rate Guide Book

As a guide book Stuart Chase's Mexico is a first rate book. He took his vacation with gusto, as he usually does. He spent five months in the country. He did a good piece of research, besides reading up on the land, its history, its sociology, its art, its politics, and summarizes with skill and clarity most of the best that has been written on Mexico. Gruening and Redfield, and Beals and Terry, Gamio and Tannenbaum and Anita Brenner and Bernal Diaz del Castillo, are all distilled into their quintessence (without removing any of the impurities) to make up many of his pages. Indeed, if the reader were to ask which single book he should read on Mexico to get a bird's eye view of its life, people, arts and problems I should recommend Stuart Chase's as the best. Others are better in special fields but no one is so comprehensive.

There is an eager and thirsty sensitivity to the rich colorfulness of the Mexican popular arts, altho the author's taste is not always discriminating, as when he takes the braggart ugliness of

the skin-tight, stuffed sausage charro costume, ugly symbol of all that is brutal and showy and blatantly tasteless in upper-class Mexico, and thinks he sees in it color, gaiety and human dignity. He would blush if he could hear what the great illustrator of his book, Diego Rivera, would say after hearing those lines translated. And have cause to ponder his taste corrupted by the very machines he deplores, if he should hear Guzman saying: "The charro ... stands for the degradation of all cultural values" (in his 'The Eagle and the Serpent').

"There's no accounting for tastes," yet we can chalk up on the credit side the eager appreciation of arts and crafts, of color and music and dance, of fiesta and leisure and gaiety, of the subordination of things to their uses and the needs of men. For all this appreciation of Mexico is really a critique of the barrenness of capitalist "culture" and "civilization" in the United States, of its colorlessness and joylessness, of its debasing of the arts, its turning leisure into a curse called unemployment, gaiety into a "racket", and subordinating men to things and replacing human relations by the pitiless cash nexus. Too late; the apologists of capitalism are discovering that the "dark" or middle ages had their virtues and that capitalism has left mankind temporarily the poorer for destroying them.

Utopian Economics

But that is to the good in Stuart Chase's book only in so far as it is a negative critique of capitalist "culture". In so far as the book involves positive solutions (and Chase did not set out to write a guide book but a sociological treatise), the solutions are hopelessly utopian and reactionary.

Beware of the machine! he bids the Mexican people. Don't industrialize! Continue to carry back-breaking loads on your backs! Beware of interdependence! Preserve your local economy! Beware of specialization and division of labor! (Yet the very arts and crafts, the blankets and pottery that Chase so much admires are the product of specialization and interdependence and are produced for exchange).

This is futile worship of the past and of a past already in full decay. But it is "decaying with such charm," writes Chase (page 5). It decays with charm if you don't look too close and if the decay is not eating into your body and soul. Chase does not look too close, and he is charmed. He glorifies the chronic undernourishment, unsanitary housing and rags of millions of the Mexican folk as "glorious wantlessness." He finds it picturesque that they carry back-breaking burdens on their backs. Their poverty is heroic "sales resistance". He is inclined to worship, as do enraptured maiden lady missionaries before Ghandi's loin cloth, spinning wheel and seafaring goats.

He does not have the faintest inkling of the fact that Mexico has started on the path of incorporation into modern capitalism and machine technique and that once a land has started with the machine it must go thru with it. Still less does he understand that the machine paves the way for a higher social system in which leisure and the arts and human relations and the domination of men over things will be restored on a higher and undreamed of scale.

And Childish Politics

As to the "politics" of the book it is even more childish than the economics and sociology. He is readily confused by the phrase-heroes of the Mexican revolution and, following Beals and Gruening and Tannenbaum, he believes that revolution has marched steadily towards greater "Indianism" since 1917 and that Obregon and Calles are the saviors of the revolution, whereas they are men who have castrated the agrarian and labor laws. And he swallows whole the myth that Morrow of the House of Morgan, who went down there to finish the job of corrupting the government and completing the sale of the revolution, was a champion of the Mexican people against American capitalism. He even finds that Samuel Compers, who acted as labor agent to debauch the Mexican Federation of Labor, went to Mexico "to strengthen the new movement across the Rio Grande." But then what can you expect of a man who is more terrified by the machine which has positive possibilities for mankind than by imperialism which has nothing but negative. He is his own best critic when he writes:

"I found it difficult to become overheated as to American imperialism—old style—in Mexico ... A greater danger to my mind lies in the invasion of gadgets, ideas and habit patterns." Mr. Chase is swallowing camels and straining at gnats. When he went to Mexico he saw only the arts and crafts and not the advancing machine and the brutalities of machineless exploitation. In Soviet Russia he sees only the machine and not the preservation of the arts and crafts and cultural autonomy, nor the subjection of the machine and nature to the expanding spirit of man. If he could see deeper he would tell the Mexicans:

"Do not fight the machine, fight imperialism and exploitation. Master the machine and it will produce plenty and leisure and life abounding. Do not follow the United States, follow the Soviet Union. Then you will preserve your arts and crafts and the color and joyousness in your life and raise them to new heights scarce dreamed of by mankind."

Chase has written a good guide book for sun worshippers who can afford five months in Mexico. But as a sociological treatise, I prefer the magnificent illustrations of Diego Rivera.

* Title of pamphlet by Stuart Chase abridged from his book Men and Machines.

The Indian Communist Opposition At Work

THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN INDIA

by S. K. Vidyarthi

June 26, 1931.

The Trade Union Congress is expected to meet in the beginning of July. Altho the Communist General Secretary and the Fascist President are united in their efforts to have the session, they may be still compelled to postpone it. The trade union movement at present is split up into no less than four groups and the official Communist tactics have contributed much to this chaotic situation. If, disregarding the wise counsels of the forces working for unity, the Trade Union Congress does meet, it will be a fraction meeting. Many unions, which still remain formally affiliated to the T. U. Congress, will not attend the session. The few attending will, in their turn, be divided into two groups fighting for the possession of the carcass of the Congress.

Foreign comrades will find it very difficult to understand the present chaotic condition of the Indian trade union movement, unless they know a little of the history leading up to it.

The 1929 Trade Union Congress Session

The last session of the T. U. Congress took place in 1929. The movement was still united and the Communists had been extending their influence very successfully. During the two years preceding, there had taken place a number of great mass strikes involving hundreds of thousands of workers on the railways, mines, cotton, jute and iron industries. The Communists had taken a considerable part in the leadership of those great struggles. The seven weeks general strike of the Bombay mill workers was completely under Communist leadership. Another strike of 80,000 railway workers was also under Communist leadership, until it was simply thrown away by ultra-left sectarianism. Meeting on the background of such a rich experience of mass struggle, the Trade Union Congress afforded the Communists a splendid opportunity to consolidate their influence. The Communists, however, were still in the minority. Only two large unions were completely under their leadership. In many other important unions, reformist influence, tho weakening, was still strong. The tactics of united front were never more applicable. The reformists were in a disadvantageous position. They could not possibly oppose the policy of militant mass struggle, if the immediate problems of the movement were placed in the forefront. Yet, they were still too strongly entrenched in a large number of unions to be completely driven out of the leadership of the Congress. The leadership still had to be shared with them for some time during which their position would be further undermined, preparatory to their final elimination.

The Communists with their influence still very unorganized, acted like swell-heads. They miscalculated the relation of forces and made an open bid for capturing

the leadership of the Congress. The fight took place not on issues immediately and vitally affecting the movement. The Communists forced a premature split on a secondary issue. It was participation in a commission appointed by the government to investigate into labor conditions and to recommend legislation. The reformists had already accepted seats on the commission. They were not prepared to give in but they could not be defeated by the left wing under Communist influence. The balance was held by the nationalists who had entered the trade union movement for their own purposes. These latter are no better than the reformists in trade union matters. But at that moment, boycott was the nationalist policy so they were against participation in the Labor Commission. The Nationalist-Communist combination outvoted the reformists who retorted by splitting away from the Congress. To secure the support of the Nationalists, the Communists had agreed to share the spoils of victory. A nationalist leader with reactionary inclinations became the president of what remained of the Congress, while the general secretaryship went to the Communist candidate. Such a team, of course, could not possibly function for an useful purpose. It was the outcome of the worst kind of opportunism, which always lurks behind ultra-leftism.

The Insane Policies of the "Loyalites"

Presently it was discovered that the reformists had not at all been beaten. On the contrary, they had come out of the fray unscathed with a solid block of the best organized unions behind them. The Fascist-Communist combination broke down as it was bound to. One union after another left the Trade Union Congress. Some joined the newly formed reformist Trade Union Federation, while others remained neutral. Then the Communists managed to cut the branch on which they were sitting. Their stronghold was the Textile Workers Union (Red Flag Union) of Bombay. They destroyed this union by driving it to a second general strike in 1929 on very flimsy issues. The previous general strike had just been concluded with partial victory for the workers. But the workers had been thoroughly exhausted in the prolonged fight. They were not at all fit to take up a new struggle immediately. The second general strike, demanding the reinstatement of a few victimized workers, therefore ended in a crushing defeat. The trade depression had set in. The owners welcomed the strike as the pretext to close down the mills. Tens of thousands of workers were thrown out of jobs. Hunger drove the rest to work on terms dictated by the employers. The morale of the workers was completely broken. The union was destroyed. The membership dropped from 82,000 to less than one thousand!

On the top of this debacle of their ultra-left policy, the Communists had the rump Executive of the Trade Union Congress pass a resolution calling for a country-wide general strike preparatory to armed insurrection which should set up the Soviet Republic of India! It sounds incredible—but it was a fact none the less. The call of course fell flat, but more unions repudiated the resolution and left the Trade Union Congress, which was reduced to a general staff without army. Now the reformists went over to the offensive. While the Communists had been ruining their position, the reformists had consolidated theirs. With a majority of the unions supporting them either directly or indirectly they came out advocating unity of the trade union movement, and demanded the expulsion of the

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with the much-heralded seasonal swing upward not in the least visible. Price levels are running very weak, with leading commodity prices sagging. Bonds, particularly railway bonds, are in very poor shape. The European situation remains acute. In England the financial position of the Labor government is extremely difficult and serious political repercussions of world-wide significance will soon be felt.