The collapse of capitalism

Cahn Herman
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Author: Cahn Herman

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THE COLLAPSE OF
CAPITALISM

By
HERMAN CAHN
AUTHOR OF "CAPITAL TODAY"

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# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Socialist Difference of Opinion</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Stagnant Economics</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. The Fatal Flaw of Capitalism</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Money of Account</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. The Social Insolvency</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. The Money Source for the War Loans</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. The War, Birth Deliverer of Socialism</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

SOME of our best informed American socialists evidently think it good policy to contend that the European socialists tried to prevent the war, but unfortunately were powerless to do so. No doubt this is mainly intended as an excuse for the German socialists who were considered the advance guard of the International until the outbreak of the war. Those who make this contention, so much at variance with the facts, believe that the socialist movement will go on after the war, much the same as before and for an indefinite time. Their purpose is to re-establish the International and in order to put the movement on the old track again, to prepare by bringing about a general reconciliation of the dissenting elements.

Lassalle has said that “it is futile to try to be cunning in great things,” and we may add that this maxim is true no matter how well intentioned the cunning might
be. There is never anything as beneficent on great occasions as the truth.

At least definitely a year before the outbreak of the war, but more probably for a number of years past, the International betrayed a lack of coherence. When that great catastrophe came, it revealed, as could plainly be foreseen, anything but that unity of action which was logically to be expected of a party priding itself on its ability to judge current events scientifically and to foretell future events by its understanding of present causes. If the science on which the party was based has not demanded important modification, something to which all sciences, especially that of economics, are subject; if a cleavage has not taken place within the working class, dividing it into social groups with antagonistic interests; and if the length of time which may seem necessary for an expected event to materialize does not influence men's present and practical, even if not theoretical, attitude in regard to such an event—then there is no explanation for the divergence of thought among those who style themselves socialists and for their failure to
act as a unit. At that critical moment united action of the International would not have been pacifistic, but revolutionary, while at present the demand for "peace by negotiation," or dickering, is purely pacifistic.

In the United States the socialist movement was too weak to be put to the real test of action, instead of mere declarations. But even here differences of opinion arose. This is not to be understood as referring at all to the handful of former party members who joined the jingo multitude—fiction writers, rich of imagination, but sorely poor in knowledge; writers for popular magazines who never were, nor needed to be, particular about their facts; sentimentalists graduated from charitable settlements; professors and other collegians handicapped by their college training, etc., etc. All these elements were liable to flop at any time. No, we refer to differences of opinion between real Marxian socialists.

The immense majority of these have to the best of their ability opposed our entrance into the war, and since this step was simply irresistible, they have since
been advocating an early peace. What evidently has determined their attitude is the old socialist ideal of universal peace, an ideal which, however, cannot be realized in an antagonistic form of society and of which the realization must be deferred until that form of society has ceased to exist.

There was, on the other hand, a small number of socialists in our midst who, with remarkable intuition, saw in this world war from the very start an act of suicide on the part of capitalism. After the die had been cast it was a mistake, so they felt, to try to prevent capitalism from accomplishing its own destruction. They could not, in conscience and as humane men, help the consummation along, but they could advise keeping our hands off. Had their advice received any attention, many a useless sacrifice to mob law would have been spared. True, these sacrifices are a mere trifle compared to the untold suffering caused by the war. This suffering went to the hearts of the few dissenters no less than it did to the hearts of the pacifists, but the former recognized that it was the inexorable