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THE ARMY ENLISTED AGAINST NATURE

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THE American working camp is a child of the depression, and as such has itself unfortunately been depressed to a level far below that of its moral possibilities. It is easy to pervert a good thing, often without knowing it.

One of the most famous cases of such unconscious perversion is memorialized by Ruskin College, Oxford. It will be recalled that Ruskin once proposed to some of his favorite students, among whom was a wealthy young American, that they should with their own hands build a road, thus ennobling themselves by honest toil and restoring to labor its proper dignity. The plan came to naught. But Ruskin's disciples, wishing to do something in lieu of this project, took American money and with it built Ruskin College where, instead of rich young men doing manual labor, we find poor young men trying to do intellectual work. And by a crowning stroke of irony, the correspondence about the road building has been preserved and hung upon the walls of Ruskin College!

The working camp idea has suffered a somewhat similar fate. In America it has been applied as a remedy for unemployment; in Europe it had its origin in a situation where unemployment played no slightest part. There it was a social movement, an expression of a new faith; the "moral equivalent of war," for which one of the greatest of American prophets, William James, was seeking.

Today, the true significance of the

working camp movement is obscured in Germany as well as in America. A good account of the experimental work in Germany during the last few years has recently been given by two young Americans, Osgood Nichols and Comstock Glaser.¹ But these young men have seen the German work camps only as a romantic outgrowth of the German youth movement, whereas in reality the camps have always been much more than that; their roots are found in far deeper soil. The work camp movement was, in fact, one phase of a decisive social change, a change of a most serious and far-reaching nature in the structure of an industrialized world.

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In the period of prosperity preceding the Great War, the economic system had no special place for young men. Gold, and not the youth of the nations, was regarded as constituting their true wealth. Buying and selling, producing and consuming were the functions of an abstraction—*homo economicus*—not of fathers and sons. Self-denial, love, comradeship had no place in economic life; there all was egotism, selfishness, money-making, individualism. It was an era of the worship of the Golden Calf.

But in their wars, even in prosperous times, governments can and do use their youth and accept their service and their

¹ *Work Camps for America*, by Osgood Nichols and Comstock Glaser. The John Day Company, 1933.

sacrifice. For military service young men of all nations have undergone the sternest sort of discipline, in which self-denial, true comradeship, infinite devotion have been demanded and been freely given.

So in pre-war Germany we find two ideals, two purposes, two systems in opposition. On the one hand there was the world of peace, which was at the same time the world of commerce, of business, of industry—a colorless world of competitive work and empty leisure from which heroism was banished and in which mere comfort was recommended to the poor as the highest good. On the other hand, there was the world of war oriented toward the deplorable goals of conquest, of suppression, of expansion by violence and bloodshed. And the preparation for this life of war was clean living, heroic discipline, devotion to a selfless cause.

Is it any wonder that in protest against such a senseless opposition of means and ends there should have arisen a movement that sought to divert the heroism of military training to the uses of society and the purposes of peace? Why, instead of training our young men to fight against their fellow men, should we not teach them to use their strength and their devotion in the conquest of nature for the common good of all?

And so there was launched and developed the idea of an *industrial army*, waging war against the miseries of society, against the opposition of classes, against all the evils of the division of labor. As early as 1912 a memorandum was sent from the University of Heidelberg to the Prussian Ministry of War in which attention was drawn to the fact that of the ninety-seven years immediately preceding, ninety-four had been years of peace and only three had been filled with wars. Therefore, said the

memorandum, our army is much more important as an instrument of universal national education than as an instrument of warfare, and hence it is desirable to change the methods of that education by adding working camps of volunteers to the army system. This will take care of the surplus of men that has developed since the rapid increase in our population has made it impossible for the army to absorb all the men eligible for military training and service.¹

Now, it is to be noted that the surplus of men in 1912 meant not unemployed laborers but those unfortunates who, though they might be economically employed, had no opportunity for real service. Not unemployment but the condition of being nothing but an employee was the evil from which escape was sought.

It follows that the working camp was not invented as a medium for the charitable relief of the economically unemployed; it was the means by which every man could be given the opportunity for service that meant not servility but spiritual fulfillment and release. Moreover, since it was the *jeunesse dorée* that had least ready access to worthy toil, the young men of wealth were the first to whom the opportunities of the working camps were opened. It was with members of the class economically and socially at the top and not at the bottom that the work of conversion in the camps began. No wages were paid them for their work, and labor therefore ceased to be a means to financial gain. Thus freed it took its rightful place as a necessary ingredient of a well-balanced life,

¹ The memorandum of 1912 was reprinted in *Im Kampf um die Erwachsenenbildung 1912-1926*, by W. Picht and E. Rosenstock. Leipzig, Quelle und Meyer, 1926. A commentary on the economic, financial, and political consequences of the memorandum is given in *Arbeitsdienst—Hetredienst*. Jena, 1931.

as an outlet for energy as natural as the other vital impulses. Finally, it should be emphasized that the work camps called upon the highest type of leadership in the nation and that in the cooperative life of these camps the best that Germany had to offer intellectually and spiritually was made available to all. It is essential to see these three principles clearly if the vision of those who first fathered the working camp movement in Germany is to be recaptured. And to one without that vision, an understanding of the movement even as it is today would be impossible; its almost unlimited possibilities for the future would be quite inconceivable.

To the German work camps in the beginning came the students, and they invited the industrial workers and the sons of farmers to join them. In some places girls, too, joined the movement. The chief difficulty in those early days lay in finding and developing the proper kinds of work. This difficulty was swept away by the tide of the depression, and the possibility of great plans for national work seemed then to be opened up.

But everything was changed once more by the revolution. The work program of the camps became secondary in the eyes of the Government, which saw clearly that the camps were not a remedy either for unemployment or for financial depression, but were usable solely as a medium for education. Under the new Government, however, the original educational aims have been corrupted in two ways. First, the students, teachers, and trained craftsmen are sent into separate camps, a measure that completely spoils the cooperative fellowship. Second, this movement as a fight for the conquest of the natural environment has been ruined. The camps have been largely militarized by being placed in charge of petty com-

missioned officers to whom the high ideals of the early leaders mean nothing. Under these circumstances the whole moral and intellectual tone of the movement has inevitably been lowered and cheapened.

Still, though their spirit has sadly changed, the camps in Germany have managed to escape the greater temptation to become an annex to the cheap labor market. That would indeed have been the final betrayal of the heart and soul of a movement that began with the idea of work as man's greatest blessing, not his curse; as the means not of his degradation but of his regeneration.

In America where the free worker has always been a proud citizen, the camps can become a positive danger. Here I find students who would not hesitate to accept employment as waiters, or even as coal miners, rebelling against the idea of going into a forestration camp. Work in the camps appears to them to be on a level lower than that of any private employment. By another of life's ironies, a form of cooperative work invented by one nation to put an end to class conflict has created in another nation a consciousness of class where none was known before.



It is still possible to hope that in America there may develop a true working camp movement which will have nothing in common with the temporary expedient that is now being tried out. In this effort, as in other things, we may reasonably look to this new and youthfully vigorous country to lead us out of bondage. The words of William James, whom I have called one of the great American prophets, offer some substance for this hope. In one of his last utterances, James described with wonderful

eloquence the new era of humanity in which war against men would be superseded by war against nature and social inertia. James said:

"If now there were, instead of military conscription, a conscription of the whole youthful population to form for a certain number of years a part of the army enlisted against *Nature*, the injustice would tend to be evened out and numerous other goods to the commonwealth would follow. The military ideals of hardihood and discipline would be wrought into the growing fibre of the people. To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dish-washing, clothes-washing, and window-washing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes, and to the frames of skyscrapers,

would our gilded youth be drafted off, according to their choice, to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas. They would have paid their blood-tax, done their own part in the immemorial warfare against *Nature*. They would tread the earth more proudly, the women would value them more highly, they would be better fathers and teachers of the following generation."¹

It is not endurable nor even thinkable that among enlightened peoples the war against nature should remain in the hands of hirelings and mercenaries, and the war against men retain a monopoly of heroism and true unselfish service.

¹ *Memories and Studies*, by William James. Longmans, Green, 1911. pp. 290-91.

IN matters that really interest him, man can not support the suspense of judgment which science so often has to enjoin. He is too anxious to feel certain to have time to know. So that we see of the sciences, mathematics appearing first, then astronomy, then physics, then chemistry, then biology, then psychology, then sociology—but always the new field was grudged to the new method, and we still have the denial to sociology of the name of science. Nowadays, matters of national defence, of politics, of religion are still too important for knowledge, and remain objects of certitude; that is to say, in them we prefer the comfort of instinctive belief, because we have not learnt adequately to value the capacity to foretell.

—W. Trotter



THE I

THERE have been this spring in the Gallery of Art in Washington approximately six hundred objects produced by six hundred of representing every section of the States. Of this exhibition, culminating point of the of Art Project, one of wrote:

"After seeing the exhibition for the fourth time, I can't enthusiastic line to you. I've seen it, it strikes me more of the truly significant of American history. . . . The thing so buoyant and up fresh, both in treatment matter, that I am reminded of Walt Whitman. What is American poetry, Veblen's literature, and Turner's project seems to me to me I kept thinking Sunda *Frontier in American* is the frontier spirit in art, to self-consciousness and sloping, surging triumph terrain."

The Public Works of A last November under the Administration, primarily employment to the professional collar classes, who have severely as any other class depression.

The specific objective of