

Not Counting Niggers, George Orwell

A dozen years ago anyone who had foretold the political line-up of today would have been looked on as a lunatic. And yet the truth is that the present situation – not in detail, of course, but in its main outlines – ought to have been predictable even in the golden age before Hitler. Something like it was bound to happen as soon as British security was seriously threatened.

In a prosperous country, above all in an imperialist country, left-wing politics are always partly humbug. There can be no real reconstruction that would not lead to at least a temporary drop in the English standard of life, which is another way of saying that the majority of left-wing politicians and publicists are people who earn their living by demanding something that they don't genuinely want. They are red-hot revolutionaries as long as all goes well, but every real emergency reveals instantly that they are shamming. One threat to the Suez Canal, and 'anti-Fascism' and 'defence of British interests' are discovered to be identical.

It would be very shallow as well as unfair to suggest that there is nothing in what is now called 'anti-Fascism' except a concern for British dividends. But it is a fact that the political obscenities of the past two years, the sort of monstrous harlequinade in which everyone is constantly bounding across the stage in a false nose – Quakers shouting for a bigger army, Communists waving Union Jacks, Winston Churchill posing as a democrat – would not have been possible without this guilty consciousness that we are all in the same boat. Much against their will the British governing class have been forced into the anti-Hitler position. It is still possible that they will find a way out of it, but they are arming in the obvious expectation of war and they will almost certainly fight when the point is reached at which the alternative would be to give away some of their own property instead of, as hitherto, other people's.

And meanwhile the so-called opposition, instead of trying to stop the drift to war, are rushing ahead, preparing the ground and forestalling any possible criticism. So far as one can discover the English people are still extremely hostile to the idea of war, but in so far as they are becoming reconciled to it, it is not the militarists but the 'anti-militarists' of five years ago who are responsible. The Labour Party keeps up a pettifogging grizzle against conscription at the same time as its own propaganda makes any real struggle against conscription impossible. The Bren machine-guns pour from the factories, books with titles like Tanks in the Next War, Gas in the Next War, etc pour from the press, and the warriors of the New Statesman gloze over the nature of the process by means of such phrases as 'Peace Bloc', 'Peace Front', 'Democratic Front', and, in general, by pretending that the world is an assemblage of sheep and goats, neatly partitioned off by national frontiers.

In this connexion it is well worth having a look at Mr (Clarence K.) Streit's much-discussed book, Union Now. Mr Streit, like the partisans of the 'Peace Bloc', wants the democracies to gang up against the dictatorships, but his book is outstanding for two reasons. To begin with he goes further than most of the others and offers a plan which, even if it is startling, is constructive. Secondly, in spite of a rather nineteen-twentyish American naiveté, he has an essentially decent cast of mind. He genuinely loathes the thought of war, and he does not sink to the hypocrisy of pretending that any country which can be bought or

bullied into the British orbit instantly becomes a democracy. His book therefore presents a kind of test case. In it you are seeing the sheep-and-goats theory at its best. If you can't accept it in that form you will certainly never accept it in the form handed out by the Left Book Club.

Briefly, what Mr Streit suggests is that the democratic nations, starting with fifteen which he names, should voluntarily form themselves into a union – not a league or an alliance, but a union similar to the United States, with a common government, common money and complete internal free trade. The initial fifteen states are, of course, the USA, France, Great Britain, the self-governing dominions of the British Empire, and the smaller European democracies, not including Czechoslovakia, which still existed when the book was written. Later, other states could be admitted to the Union when and if they 'proved themselves worthy'. It is implied all along that the state of peace and prosperity existing within the Union would be so enviable that everyone else would soon be pining to join it.

It is worth noticing that this scheme is not so visionary as it sounds. Of course it is not going to happen, nothing advocated by well-meaning literary men ever happens, and there are certain difficulties which Mr Streit does not discuss; but it is of the order of things which could happen. Geographically the USA and the western European democracies are nearer to being a unit than, for instance, the British Empire. Most of their trade is with one another, they contain within their own territories everything they need, and Mr Streit is probably right in claiming that their combined strength would be so great as to make any attack on them hopeless, even if the USSR joined up with Germany. Why then does one see at a glance that this scheme has something wrong with it? What is there about it that smells – for it does smell, of course?

What it smells of, as usual, is hypocrisy and self-righteousness. Mr Streit himself is not a hypocrite, but his vision is limited. Look again at his list of sheep and goats. No need to boggle at the goats (Germany, Italy and Japan), they are goats right enough, and billies at that. But look at the sheep! Perhaps the USA will pass inspection if one does not look too closely. But what about France? What about England? What about even Belgium and Holland? Like everyone of his school of thought, Mr Streit has coolly lumped the huge British and French empires – in essence nothing but mechanisms for exploiting cheap coloured labour – under the heading of democracies!

Here and there in the book, though not often, there are references to the 'dependencies' of the democratic states. 'Dependencies' means subject races. It is explained that they are to go on being dependencies, that their resources are to be pooled among the states of the Union, and that their coloured inhabitants will lack the right to vote in Union affairs. Except where the tables of statistics bring it out, one would never for a moment guess what numbers of human beings are involved. India, for instance, which contains more inhabitants than the whole of the 'fifteen democracies' put together, gets just a page and a half in Mr Streit's book, and that merely to explain that as India is not yet fit for self-government the status quo must continue.

And here one begins to see what would really be happening if Mr Streit's scheme were put into operation. The British and French empires, with their six hundred million disenfranchised human beings, would simply be receiving fresh police forces; the huge strength of the USA would be behind the robbery of India and Africa. Mr Streit is letting cats out of

bags, but all phrases like 'Peace Bloc', 'Peace Front', etc contain some such implication; all imply a tightening-up of the existing structure. The unspoken clause is always 'not counting niggers'. For how can we make a 'firm stand' against Hitler if we are simultaneously weakening ourselves at home? In other words, how can we 'fight Fascism' except by bolstering up a far vaster injustice?

For of course it is vaster. What we always forget is that the over-whelming bulk of the British proletariat does not live in Britain, but in Asia and Africa. It is not in Hitler's power, for instance, to make a penny an hour a normal industrial wage; it is perfectly normal in India, and we are at great pains to keep it so. One gets some idea of the real relationship of England and India when one reflects that the per capita annual income in England is something over £80, and in India about £7.

It is quite common for an Indian coolie's leg to be thinner than the average Englishman's arm. And there is nothing racial in this, for well-fed members of the same races are of normal physique; it is due to simple starvation. This is the system which we all live on and which we denounce when there seems to be no danger of its being altered. Of late, however, it has become the first duty of a 'good anti-Fascist' to lie about it and help to keep it in being.

What real settlement, of the slightest value, can there be along these lines? What meaning would there be, even if it were successful, in bringing down Hitler's system in order to stabilize something that is far bigger and in its different way just as bad?

But apparently, for lack of any real opposition, this is going to be our objective. Mr Streit's ingenious ideas will not be put into operation, but something resembling the 'Peace Bloc' proposals probably will. The British and Russian governments are still haggling, stalling and uttering muffled threats to change sides, but circumstances will probably drive them together. And what then? No doubt the alliance will stave off war for a year or two. Then Hitler's move will be to feel for a weak spot or an unguarded moment; then our move will be more armaments, more militarization, more propaganda, more war-mindedness - and so on, at increasing speed.

It is doubtful whether prolonged war-preparation is morally any better than war itself; there are even reasons for thinking that it may be slightly worse. Only two or three years of it, and we may sink almost unresisting into some local variant of austro-Fascism. And perhaps a year or two later, in reaction against this, there will appear something we have never had in England yet - a real Fascist movement. And because it will have the guts to speak plainly it will gather into its ranks the very people who ought to be opposing it.

Further than that it is difficult to see. The downward slide is happening because nearly all the Socialist leaders, when it comes to the pinch, are merely His Majesty's Opposition, and nobody else knows how to mobilize the decency of the English people, which one meets with everywhere when one talks to human beings instead of reading newspapers. Nothing is likely to save us except the emergence within the next two years of a real mass party whose first pledges are to refuse war and to right imperial injustice. But if any such party exists at present, it is only as a possibility, in a few tiny germs lying here and there in unwatered soil.

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