

AFTER THE DELUGE, BY LEONARD WOOLF

Oxford Outlook 12 no. 57 (February 1932), 68–70



MR WOOLF has written a book of real interest and value and at the same time has made a gigantic claim which he has done nothing as yet to substantiate. What he has actually done in this volume, though considerable in itself, is as nothing in the face of what he promised to do: he has collected a number of views embodying certain basic political, ethical, and sociological concepts, expressed by representative politicians and publicists in the eighteenth and, to some extent, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and surrounded these with many pages of earnest and stimulating discussion; the book is interesting, readable, and eminently intelligent. This in itself is, of course, excellent so far as it goes.

AFTER THE DELUGE

What Mr Woolf claims to be doing, however, is to be analysing the complete ideal background of the last centuries of Western civilisation, the evolving complex of ideas, feelings and resultant attitudes which has given rise to the present state of affairs.

Mr Woolf knows that the duty of the historian is not to be a mere chronicler and record facts, that it is his business to make judgements of value in the light of which alone such terms as progress or regress have any meaning. His remarks on the need for the historian to be axiological are excellent, and show that the view of the historian's task picturesquely and eloquently preached by Croce, and analysed far more carefully and profoundly by Rickert, is at last gaining ground among English historians, as it did long ago among philosophers. But these good intentions are enunciated in the introductory chapter, only to be abandoned: in the rest of the book no attempt is made to state the meaning, as opposed to the occurrence in political phraseology of, for example, such terms as 'liberty' or 'democracy'. The ideal of democracy is discussed in its connection with French and American theorists, but nothing is said which makes at all clear and distinct what Mr Woolf believes democracy to be.

The book purports to be a study in mass psychology; to be examining those fundamental concepts and categories in which our social thought inevitably flows, and every alteration in which is [69] therefore a cause or at least a symptom of real change in the structure of our world, material or mental. And it is, of course, very important and even exciting to do this: to discern to one's own satisfaction what such concepts as *liberty*, *personality*, *happiness*, *nationalism*, *authority* and the like, which one continually employs and thinks reasonable to fight for or against, really mean to oneself and to others; how these concepts were formulated, and whether they have developed with changing conditions or are dead and illusory and persist solely through the associations that vaguely cluster about impressive names.

Such an analysis, by isolating and revealing the essence and history of the ideas which, whether justifiably or not, pose as the motives of social actions, might, if it were sufficiently acute, have a deep influence on both thought and conduct. With a spurious objectivity, Mr Woolf prefers to quote excerpts, interesting in themselves, from statements made by others: this method is meant to illustrate the growth of democracy, for example, as an actual

AFTER THE DELUGE

form of government and as a subject of theory; and so it might have done under other conditions. If the author had really examined the concept and described its historical essence, he might then have profitably gone on to explain its value to others. Instead of which he starts at the opposite end, by giving illustrations, when we are not certain yet that they all illustrate the same object, because we have not been shown what that object is, or how we are to set about looking for it. We are provided with a number of statements in which the same words, words like 'liberty' and 'rights' and 'individual' occur, but we are given no guarantee that these words are used by their authors with anything like identical or even similar meaning.

There are only two possibilities: either such words do stand for something definite and concrete, in which case an analysis, in the light of what evidence you please, of their meaning and of the value of the things they stand for, is a prerequisite of any discussion of the development and change which they undergo; or else they are inherently vague and indefinable, and are used to mean a variety of different entities at various times and in various societies, in which case a method which claims to elucidate anything by an examination of them and their effects is making a false claim – you can explain nothing in terms of the neces[70]sarily obscure.

Mr Woolf allows himself to be vehemently indignant at times, as when he discusses the beliefs underlying certain opinions about the legality of the General Strike, to which he has every right, since it is as much a part of the historian's business to make judgements of value as of description, both being based on explicitly adduced evidence. But whereas descriptive or causal judgements are tested by one standard only, that of correspondence to fact, of the objects described having the alleged position and connections in time and space, judgements of value presuppose not only this purely factual standard, but also a standard of values which belongs to such judgements alone. And on the nature of such a standard there is so little agreement that unless the historian explicitly states what his standard is, how he distinguishes between Mr Woolf's 'progress and regress', these terms and others like them tend to seem arbitrary; his assertions remain unconvincing so long as their ground is obscure; where no definite criterion of valuation is disclosed, one naturally suspects that none is being

AFTER THE DELUGE

applied, that the judgements of value are founded on a series of uncorrelated immediate intuitions, which neither show nor possess any underlying unity.

I do not imply that Mr Woolf's value judgements are a mere bundle of irrational opinions; what I do imply, however, is that he robs them of much potential worth by refusing to give them an explicit rational foundation. The task of correlation is left to the reader, and even if his enthusiasm in the pursuit of truth drives him to perform this labour, he must very soon confess it hopeless, for the concepts employed by the author as the tools of analysis remain hazy and fluctuating to the end, and it is impossible to discern unity among elements which are at once unstable and amorphous.

Yet in spite of this serious defect of method, which, if the author remains of the same mind, no future volumes can remedy, the book remains extraordinarily interesting. All the questions raised are of really vital importance: the issue between liberty and authority, which is the central issue of the essay, is more critical and pressing at present than any other political problem; and Mr Woolf's integrity and breadth of conception are such that, with all its faults, this book is easily the most valuable discussion of the subject of recent date.

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Posted 21 July 2017