BOOKS

Blind Leaders of the Blind

PROUDHON'S SOLUTION OF THE SOCIAL PROBLEM. By P. J. Proudhon. Edited by Henry Cohen. Vanguard Press. Fifty cents.

THE best review of this book has already been written. It was written over 70 years ago by Karl Marx in his "The Poverty of Philosophy," a reply to the "Philosophy of Poverty" of M. Proudhon.

Proudhon's solution of the social problem is the "solution" of the petty-bourgeoisie who, horrified by the "excesses" of capitalism, insists on a "radical" reform which will eliminate all the "bad" features and leave only the "good," the "natural" features of capitalism—private property, "individual initiative"—in other words, leave the capitalist system intact. Concretely, Proudhon's "solution" was the establishment of a society of small producers freed from the yoke of the "usurious" banks by a system of free credit ("The Bank of the People," "Mutual Banking"). This is the paradise of the petty artisan but it has nothing whatever in common with the ideals and aspirations of the revolutionary proletarian.

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Engels characterized Proudhon's "solution" very aptly as "the utopia of the 'little man' whose 'honest labor' —even when it is only that of his workmen or that of his apprentices—loses every day more and more of its value thru the competition of great industry and of machinery."

It is our opinion that Proudhon has been greatly overrated by historians of socialist thought. He was not original (witness the English socialists Hopkins, Thompson, Edmonds, and especially Bray, all before Proudhon); he was densely ignorant of economics which he continually confused with moral and philosophical considerations; as a philosopher he was very nearly a joke—Marx jestingly points out that the philosophers thought Proudhon a good economist but a poor philosopher while the economists praised his philosophy but ridiculed his economics; to say that he was a revolutionist is ridiculous. He continually preached class collaboration and submission, and had not the faintest idea of the historical role of the revolutionary proletariat. Yet Proudhon reflected a certain stage of the development of the proletariat in France—a certain very immature stage—and he and his teachings exercised considerable influence over certain sections of the French proletariat for some time. Therefore his works and his ideas are of importance to us but their content and their historical role can only be intelligible to us today if they are interpreted from the Marxist standpoint.

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Unfortunately, however, the "editor" of this is precisely of a type who should never have been chosen for so delicate a task. As far as I can see from his preface and his notes he shared all of Proudhon's old illusions and none of his good points. His economic ideas are so quaint as to be laughable. His knowledge of Marxism is fairly represented in this delicious quotation: "Thus we find Karl Marx spending his time studying in the British Museum and predicting a new society in which the state would be everything."

His "socialism" is interestingly depicted in his objections to the workers "taking hold of the means of production," to the "cooperative ownership of capital": "It is a limitation of liberty, and thus undesirable politically; and, as the ownership of capital is not the cause of exploitation, it is unnecessary economically." Finally, for his keen understanding of the class forces at work in society: "We have now learned that people are very much alike, irrespective of the class to which they belong." To have such a person edit and explain Proudhon's writings is verily the blind leading the blind.

—WILL HERBERG.

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George Bernard Shaw, the Fabian playwright, is now simply resting on his laurels. Recently he has had to resort to praising Mussolini as a means of getting ballast for his witticisms.

And occasionally Komroff epitomizes his attitude toward life in such a revolutionary sentence as, "I am not good enough to make the monument of a man who has slaved 40 years in a hell-hole factory."

But the many episodes in the book, several of them wild exotic ones showing the influence of Conrad, are not woven together as necessary parts of a central theme. The author skips aimlessly from this thing to that, he becomes repetitious and the story drags like a long drawn-out, doomed, textile strike.

The publishers say, "This novel is an opinion of victory gained after the sacrifice of one man's life to an extraordinary succession of experiences and quests. The end is Victory, but in such guise that only the true of heart may recognize her."

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The end actually is the hero's death after he is utterly disillusioned with the world and has lost all faith in living. Or, as the author would say, after he has refused to be further tempted by the juggler's kiss, the "force that urges on life and spurs up ambition."

"The end is Victory?" Komroff closes with a dismal pessimism that sees no hope of a better world, that does not consider the power of the masses, or see the genuine worthwhileness of any individual. All of his characters are found wanting. All is defeat and darkness.

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Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, and Eugene O'Neill have lavished praise upon this first novel of "one of the old anarchistic crowd." This reviewer, however, believes they were more anxious to press-agent a friend than accurately estimate the worth of a contemporary.

—WALTER SNOW.

Amtorg Office Issues Statement on Platinum

A. Linde, Director of Edelmetalle Aktion Ges. (Russplatina) of Berlin, the Soviet platinum export organization of which the Amtorg Trading Corporation is the New York representative, issued the following statement yesterday:

"Rumors current in trading circles that the Russplatina is conducting negotiations with a group of refiners for the purpose of granting the latter a monopoly on the sale of Russian platinum in the United States have no foundation in fact.

"I am authorized to state that the sale of Russian platinum on the American market by the Russplatina will continue on the same basis as