

The Consciences of Peoples

9 December 1945.

Is it awake, or is it asleep?! Is it clear, or is it obscure?! Does it influence the actions of governments, or does it have no influence on these actions, little or much? These are questions that those who follow the course of world affairs these days put to themselves when they are alone with their thoughts, and put to one another when they meet — and it is only natural that the answers to these questions should differ among themselves in the sharpest way, since the peoples themselves differ among themselves in the sharpest way.

Yet it is possible, nonetheless — indeed it is certain — that there exists a common measure on which all civilized peoples agree, whatever their share of progress, and however much they differ among themselves in this progress; for there is no doubt that every civilized people on earth today has acquired a new sense that did not exist before, even if these peoples' shares of this sense vary — namely, the sense of a marked aspiration toward achieving a measure of justice in political and social systems without which peoples cannot live.

The advance of civilization, the spread of culture, and the penetration of education into the various classes of nations — all of this was a source for the emergence of this new sense, and for the grave development to which it led in the life of individuals and communities. And although there are various ways of measuring the connection between civilization and this new sense, we can place our trust in this particular measure — the measure of the spread of culture and the penetration of education; for it is this measure that stirred up the idea of equality between conquerors and conquered in the second century of the Hijra, and brought about the transfer of power from the Umayyads to the Abbasids, and it is this measure that stirred up the Zanj rebellion in Basra during the third century of the Hijra, and the Qarmatian movement in the eastern Islamic world at the end of the third century and during the fourth century of the Hijra.

For had it not been for the translation of the sciences, letters, and arts from foreign languages into Arabic, and had it not been for the spread of these sciences, letters, and arts, and their descent from the privileged classes to the middle classes and to the oppressed classes, these classes would never have coveted justice, would never have aspired

to equality, and these revolts would never have taken place.

And Europe's case in this is similar to that of the Muslims, allowing for the differences that arise from time and place: the emergence of science, letters, and art from the monasteries of monks and the palaces of nobles, and their spread, thanks to the printing press, through the cities and villages, and their being made available to everyone capable of reading and acquiring culture — all of this spread throughout Europe a sense of individual self-awareness, an aspiration to realize one's own personality, and a covetousness for justice and equality; and all this drove individuals and communities to repudiate the old systems and to contemplate new systems that would satisfy, to a greater or lesser degree, people's need for justice, freedom, and equality.

And the history of Europe in modern times is nothing but a precise depiction of this connection between the spread of culture and education on the one hand, and the spread of the sense of need for justice, freedom, and equality on the other. And the grave events that took place in Europe are nothing but images of these connections, arising from them and acting upon them in turn, strengthening on the one hand the advance of science, letters, and art, and strengthening on the other the sense of need for justice, freedom, and equality; so the events of the French Revolution, the events of American independence, Napoleon's wars, Europe's upheavals, the emergence of socialism, the two World Wars, and the triumph of communism between them — all these events, and countless other events besides, are natural results of this connection between the spread of education and culture, and the existence of a human personality conscious of its own right, aspiring to its right to justice, freedom, and equality.

I do not mean to write a chapter of history; I mean only to pause over these events that are now convulsing the earth, after the end of the Second World War, in order to show that these events are neither strange, nor curious, nor anomalous, but rather natural phenomena with no way of being turned back, and no hope of being averted; indeed, they must run their full course and reach their appointed end, however much those who resist may resist them, and those who oppose may oppose them.

How splendid is that ancient Greek symbol which humanity still strives to understand and comprehend, drawing from it the most splendid lessons and admonitions! The symbol of that titan, or that god, who stole

fire from heaven and offered it as a gift to the people of the earth, thereby enabling them to labor, to strive, and to win for themselves a freedom and a dignity that even made it possible for them to rise up against the gods of Olympus.

And that titan, or that god, was tormented with the most severe torment; but mankind had already received from him the spark of fire and spread it among themselves, winning for themselves, by it, whatever freedom, science, letters, and art they won, and reaching by it whatever progress they reached, and that unceasing aspiration toward justice, freedom, and equality.

This spark, then, which that titan, or that god, stole, has now become a vast and tremendous fire, its flame blazing in Europe and America, its sparks flying everywhere, and no sooner does one of these sparks reach some region of the earth, or some generation of mankind, than it takes hold there and settles, then grows and flares up within it, then kindles life, vigor, and warmth. And behold, people learn and acquire culture and become conscious of their individual and social selves, and demand for these selves their natural right to justice, freedom, and equality.

This spark that titan stole is what revealed to mankind his own conscience, and it is this same spark that spreads among nations and peoples and reveals to them their own consciences. And once a man has discovered his conscience, there is no longer any way to subdue him or to humble him; for this conscience is a mirror, exceedingly clear, with two faces: one depicting the injustice that cannot be borne, and the other depicting the justice that can neither be patiently foregone nor renounced.

Those who wish to turn peoples back from their aspiration to justice, freedom, and equality will achieve nothing of it, unless they can extinguish this immortal spark, turn the waters of rivers back to their springs, and prevent the planets and the stars from casting their light into space.

And if the events of the struggle between injustice and justice, between bondage and freedom, between domination and equality, indicate anything at all, they indicate that man is truly a strange creature, combining within himself the wisdom that builds civilization and advances it, and the folly that demolishes this civilization and annuls it. And wisdom is the one that triumphs in the end, for it has always

triumphed since that titan stole that fire from heaven.

These peoples now in turmoil across Europe, striving to win social justice after having won political freedom, see themselves only in the mirror of their own consciences: they see an unbearable misery, and a possible bliss that must be attained; so they recoil from the hateful misery and strive toward the bliss so dear to their souls. And it is for this reason that they change their systems of government; for systems of government are not ends in themselves, but merely means toward the happiness of individuals and communities.

If the British have turned away from conservative capitalist rule to the rule of the Labour socialists, this has no source but that the British people's conscience has painted for them an odious misery under the shadow of capital, and a possible bliss under the shadow of socialism. And say the same of France, which wished to retain something of conservatism, and so retained, in the Popular Republican Movement, a sort of socialist conservatism — if the expression may be allowed — because the French people's conscience had painted for them a hideous misery in the capitalist system, and a smiling hope in the socialist system.

And what is happening throughout Europe now is nothing but a struggle between these two images reflected by the consciences of peoples: the image of gloomy despair on one side, and the image of smiling hope on the other. And to the extent that strength and favorable circumstances are available to these peoples, they draw away from despair and draw near to hope. This struggle may be long or short, but it ends, in the end, in the result it always ends in: that the sun of hope will erase the darkness of despair.

This struggle used to take place in Europe and America alone until the end of the last century, indeed until the beginning of this century; but the two World Wars increased that fire's blazing and burning, scattering its sparks far and wide, letting them fall across every region of the earth, where they took hold in every place, then flared up, grew, and filled souls with warmth and hearts with vigor. And behold, every civilized region of the earth comes to know itself, to discover its own conscience, and to see these two images: the image of misery that must be shed, and the image of bliss that must be striven for.

These peoples who demand independence, these peoples who demand internal reform, these peoples who repel the foreigner from the soil of the homeland, these peoples who try to change their own systems

of government — all these peoples were once heedless and ignorant; then knowledge and culture reached them. And knowledge and culture do not come from books alone, nor are they sought in schools alone; they now come from every direction, are sought through every path, and are attained by every means. These peoples have been overtaken by knowledge and culture, and have discovered their own consciences, and have seen an injustice that must be lifted, and so they try to lift it, and a justice that must be attained, and so they try to attain it.

And the unjust resist, and grow fiercer in their resistance, but the wronged attack, and grow fiercer in their attack. And history has taught us — ever since there was history — that the wronged have always been stronger than the unjust, and that the gates of heaven are not opened to them alone; rather, at the same time, there open to them the gates of this calm hope that spreads through the air and teaches the wronged how to be patient, how to endure, and how to maneuver around their problems until they break free of them.

What is happening in the Far East, between the victorious, dominant nations and the nations that were once subject to colonization and do not wish to return to that subjection, is nothing but one single thing: that these nations have discovered their own consciences, have seen a humiliation that must be erased, and a dignity that must endure, and they strive to erase the humiliation and attain the dignity that is their due.

What is this turmoil convulsing the Middle East, whose news reaches us garbled and distorted, so that we can make out from it neither truth nor accuracy?!

What is happening in Iran? Is it the struggle between the victorious Russians and Anglo-Saxons? Is it a struggle between them and the Iranians, who wish to be free unto themselves and to recover their freedom in their own homeland? Or is it, at the same time, a struggle among the Iranians themselves, because the strong among them oppress the weak?! All of this is possible, and it is most likely that all of it is true. But there is something else about which there is no doubt: that the Iranian people, across their various classes, have begun to discover their own conscience, and see a foreign domination that ought not to remain, and see an internal injustice that must be removed.

And these reports now reaching us from Turkey — this fear of a Kurdish or Armenian uprising here or there, this fear of foreign pressure, this attempt to establish an opposition, this clash between those on the

right and those on the left — all of this indicates nothing but that the Turkish people have begun to discover the depths of their own conscience, and that they too aspire to something more than a strong, impregnable independence: to justice, freedom, and equality.

And this Arab East, which strives to unite its word and to expel foreign domination from its homeland, reforming its own life so as to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and clothe the naked, is only discovering its own conscience little by little, and seeing hideous images that must be shunned, and splendid images that must be loved and sought.

And what you see across every region of the earth, of these upheavals that grow violent at times until they reach the point of war, and grow mild at times until they do not go beyond mere words — these upheavals are nothing but strong or weak traces of these consciences, which lay buried deep within human souls, and which man has begun to discover little by little, just as the prospector discovers in the earth the treasures the earth conceals within it...

And man is destined to discover his own conscience, and to reach the depths of this conscience, one day; and peoples are destined to win their rights, and to attain their ends, one day — but one must always read this noble verse, and reflect upon it, and reflect upon it well: "Or did you suppose that you would enter Paradise while God had not yet made known those among you who strive, and made known those who are steadfast?"