

Part V TOWARD THE RADICAL CENTER

Let's Be Revolutionary Children of the Poor The Mother At the Crossroads of Europe

In the 1930's, as Čapek's reputation grew, so did the frequency and severity of hostile criticism, personal and literary. To a considerable extent, this was motivated by Čapek's stance of avoiding either extreme, thus antagonizing the left, which had long played a dominant role in Czech culture, as well as the right, which was rapidly gaining power and confidence. In addition, Čapek's closeness to President Masaryk made him a convenient target for people who wished to attack Masaryk but did not dare do so directly because of the immense personal prestige and popularity of the Republic's founding father.

With the rise of fascism, Čapek felt compelled to employ his skills in defense of democracy and his threatened homeland. He campaigned tirelessly in this cause, through essays, radio talks and speeches, in spite of the fact that he had always found an overt public role difficult and distasteful. The novel *War with the Newts* (1936) and the play *The White Plague* (1937) have strong political concerns. Čapek's play *The Mother* (1938) examines the conventional roles of the sexes, but it is above all a call to arms in defense of freedom. The idea of the play apparently arose from a news photo of a distraught mother during the Spanish Civil War.

Čapek's wife states that she originally wanted to write the play herself but that Karel persuaded her to leave the task to him. The play shows how difficult it was for the peace-loving, tolerant Čapek to adopt a single-minded, militaristic position. As usual in a Čapek work, many conflicting points of view are given a hearing, and it is only after much hesitation, at the very end of the play, that the heroine—and by implication, the author—makes a declaration of war.

'At the Crossroads of Europe' (1938) unhappily has a very contemporary ring to it. It was Čapek's last-minute *cri de coeur* to the Western democracies in which he had so fervently believed.

A persistent theme of left-wing critics was Čapek's supposed insensitivity to social ills and his reluctance to take an activist position on social issues, as Czech authors have traditionally been expected to do. There is some truth to this allegation. Only a small part of Čapek's vast output of essays and articles is directly concerned with poverty or other social problems. It is also true that when Čapek did address such issues he generally did so in the spirit of a compassionate witness rather than an impassioned reformer.

Yet nobody can doubt Čapek's deep empathy for human suffering and misery, explicit in such pieces as 'Children of the Poor' and implicit in just about everything he ever wrote. Above all, nobody can doubt Čapek's dedication to truth. As we have attempted to show in this Reader, he was a radical in a deep sense, a man who was never satisfied with surface appearance but always tried to get close to the root of things, to that elusive center.

LET'S BE REVOLUTIONARY

Our forefathers, particularly our immediate spiritual forefathers, devoted themselves to a philosophy which was primarily evolutionary. For many reasons, they believed that everything in the world begins and continues through slow and gradual evolution. For example, over the course of many millions of years, a protozoan kept developing to a higher and higher state until it became a brewer's horse; over the ages an amoeba kept changing and refining itself until it became a big businessman or a university professor; and, perhaps in a few thousand years, through the same process, a bank president will develop into a superman. This theory of evolution has not yet been refuted, but it is getting just a little bit complicated, and the further we pursue it, the harder it gets for us to imagine how all this actually happened. Still, the concept of evolution has penetrated very deeply into our thoughts and habits; we say that things are evolving, that we have to wait for things to evolve further, that future evolution will bring us the answer, and so on. The word "evolution" has acquired the same status as the mysterious words "providence" and "divine ordinance." On the other hand, the words "upheaval" and "revolution" suggest something unnatural, destructive or violent, something which has no place in the natural order of things and is at odds with common sense.

All right, but in real life the word "evolution" seems, if I may say so, to imply very long periods of time, and amounts to procrastination. It may be true that a man must evolve from a child or an executive from a clerk, but this is only because the process takes so long. When a man wakes up in his bed in the morning, we don't say that he has evolved from a state of sleep to a state of wakefulness; it's a sudden change, and if you're hard to wake up, even a violent upheaval. A hungry man doesn't become a satiated man through a slow evolutionary process but as the result of a revolutionary act: eating his fill in a hurry. Sleep is not an evolutionary stage of wakefulness; going to sleep is almost like a

love - a revolutionary force

jump into darkness. A young man who has fallen in love hasn't evolved through countless leisurely changes from an imperfect creature into a perfect fool; rather, he goes through a sudden, precipitous revolution which rocks his very being with passion. In most cases love doesn't evolve, it just breaks out. When even the most peaceful man lights up a peacepipe, he's playing with fire. A thought doesn't usually evolve slowly; it jumps up at you like a spry flea. From morning to night, life is more a series of small revolutions than a smooth evolution.

But what modern physics is doing to us is even worse. It turns out that all activity in matter is just a lot of small revolutions. Some electron suddenly hops like a crazy man into another orbit; all material processes are supposed to be internal, so to speak, communal revolutions in atoms. Everything that happens takes the form of a constant jumping back and forth from one state to another. Matter has neither gentle continuity nor smooth transitions, but only jumps; it's really quite terrifying. The ink from my pen dries by means of violent and precipitous events taking place in its black interior. A hundred thousand atoms carry out a homemade revolt so that one letter can dry. The ink itself, however, dries and blackens slowly; I would say that it evolves.

And precisely here we see the strange and profound thing about nature: electrons may prance about, but an inkwell isn't going to prance about a desk. The atom is terribly revolutionary, but the mass is basically peaceful. The last individual atom undergoes a violent transformation, but matter changes slowly. Human life during a day is a series of revolutions; during a year it is a small piece of evolution. But if we have to change the world, let's at least be revolutionary like atoms; let's each of us take a step forward by himself. The world won't take a step forward; the world is broad and peaceful, like matter. We need millions of individuals to accomplish revolutions in themselves, so that the people as a whole can evolve. We need every individual to do what he can do the best; then mankind will change a bit too, at its endless leisure, of course. The natural order of things dictates making not one revolution, but making a million revolutions. This is the only morality flowing from the revolutionary order of nature.

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