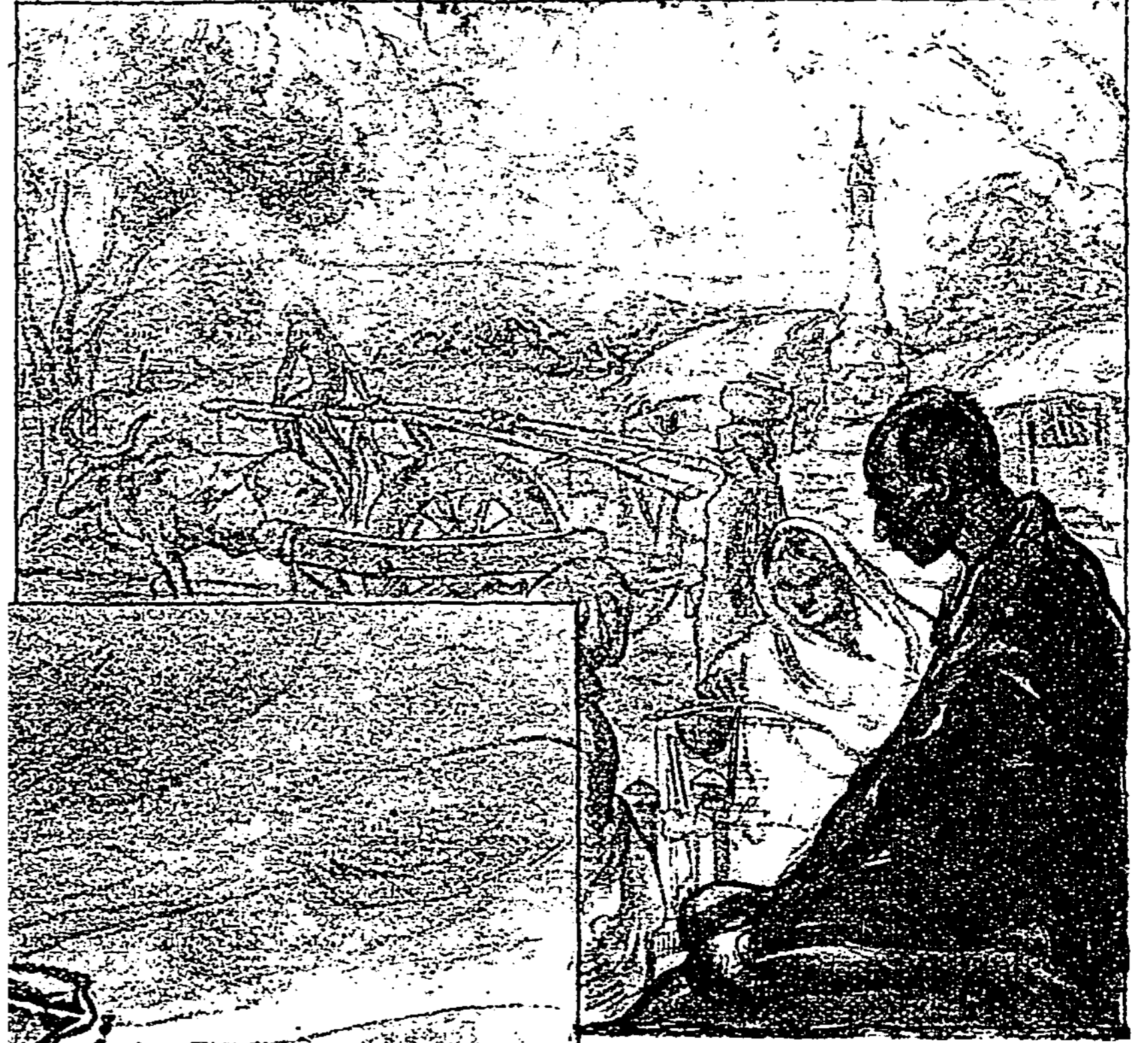
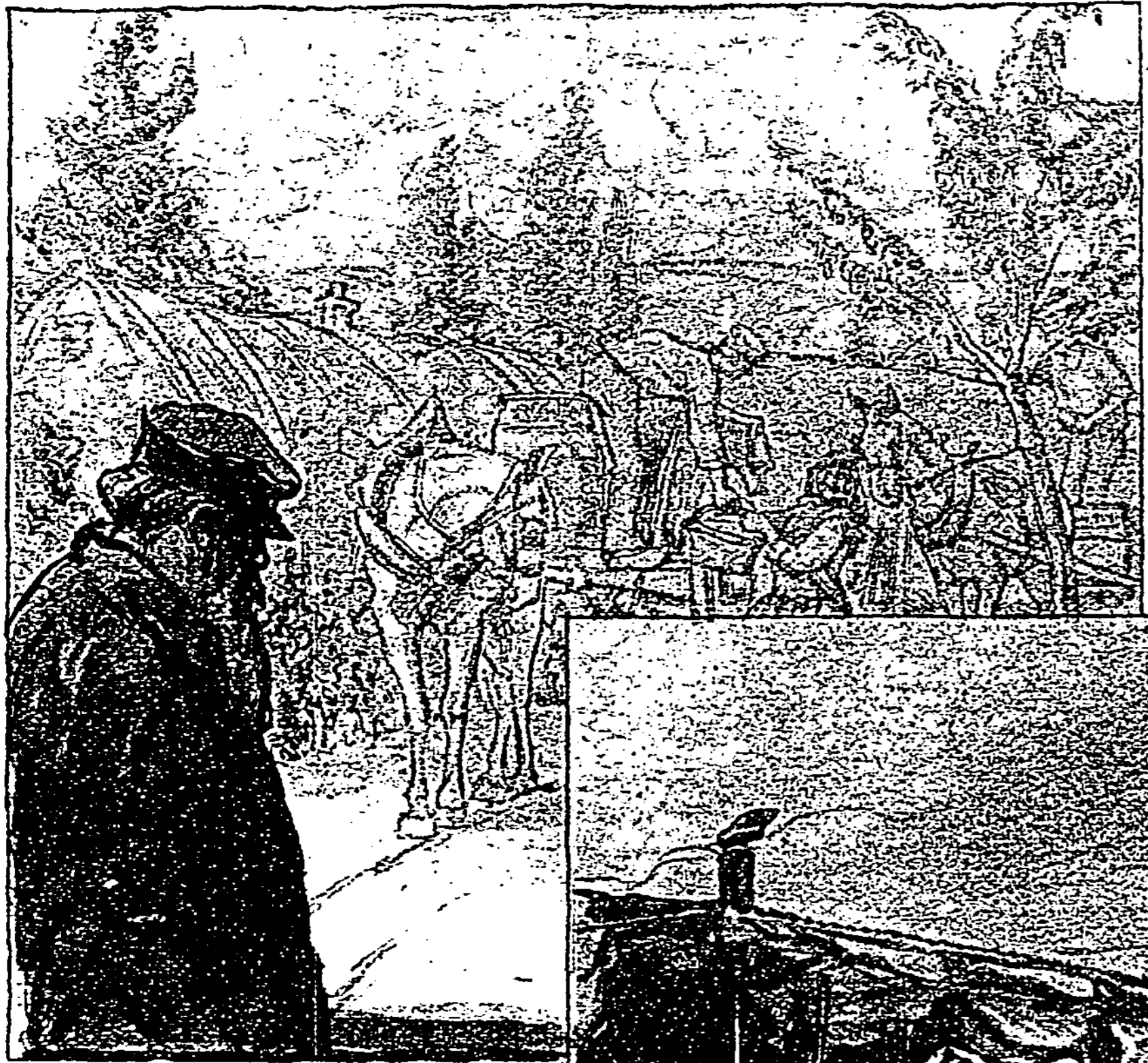


IN DEFENSE OF AMERICAN IDEALS

Glenn Frank, of the University of Wisconsin, Answers the Criticisms of Karel Capek—He Says We Shall Gain Leisure for Spiritual Things by Developing Our Machine Civilization



In a recent number of THE TIMES MAGAZINE there was published an article by Karel Capek, in which the Czech dramatist put the case against "Americanization." So striking and so rigorous was his indictment that it called unquestionably for an answer. Glenn Frank, President of the University of Wisconsin, was asked to make that answer. He has done so in the article that follows.

By GLENN FRANK

I SHALL not soon forget the evening I watched Karel Capek, the Czech dramatist, bring a machine civilization to the bar of judgment in his "R. U. R." I thought then that there was more than a chemical trace of the crusader in M. Capek. The impassioned voice of the evangelist spoke from the wings that night warning us moderns against making mechanization the spiritual mistress of our existence.

M. Capek's interest in the issues arising out of man's relation to his machines did not die with the production of his play. The other Sunday, in this magazine, with the sadness of the unheeded prophet made readable by the tempered smartness of the cynic, M. Capek preached a lay sermon on the sterile ideals of a materialistic and mechanized America. In the rôle of Samson he sought to push down what he regards as the three pillars of American society—speed, success and size.

We are, if M. Capek is to be believed, a hasty and hoggish lot, more interested in the size of things than in the soul of things. He sought to shame us by showing us the picture of a Europe that is, or was before it began to be Americanized, creatively lazy, qualitatively successful and uninfected by the craze for quantity.

M. Capek thinks that the American passion for speed is bound to produce a people spiritually out of breath. He revels in the fact that he spent two years in building a little house with workmen who "had time between the laying of two bricks to chat a little, to drink beer, to expectorate, and to scratch



THREE MAJOR PHILOSOPHIES OF LIFE.

The Philosophy of the "Shepherd of Arcady," the Philosophy of the Social Mystic and the Philosophy of the Engineer.

their backs." He would not willingly surrender the joy he found in going through a strike of bricklayers, carpenters, cabinet-makers, parquet layers and tilers that made the building of his house "a two-year social struggle." The building of his house was, to M. Capek, not a contract job finished on schedule time; it was a chapter of his life.

He shudders at the thought of the speed with which his house might have been built by American methods. Yankee speed, he thinks, would have robbed him of the delicious satisfaction he found in planning for and playing with the building of his house through two dramatic years. And he thinks his more leisurely laborers had a better time. "Europe," he reminds us, "was in very

little haste when she made her cathedrals and her philosophic systems. A man who wants to think out something does not hurry, watch in hand. He resembles more a man who is idle and wasting his time." With sly irony, he speaks of "the broad-minded laziness" that has fertilized the life of Europe with some of its richest values.

M. Capek thinks that the American passion for success is bound to produce a people insensitive to the more delicate as well as to the more daring values of life. He speaks of "a certain heroic tradition" fostered by a Europe in which "people have been living and dying for faith or for truth or for other somewhat irrational things, but never for success," at least not for the sort of success

that is hawked in the American market place by gaudy advertisements that stir the stevedore to dream of becoming a steel king.

"Foolish Europe," he says, chiding us by indirection, "found time to interest herself in thousands of things other than successes, and these things have survived while all the successes, no matter how many there were in history, went to the devil. How many things would have been left undone if those who did them had been thinking of success!"

M. Capek thinks that the American passion for quantity is bound to produce a people decreasingly concerned with quality. He lashes us with his critical cat-o-nine-tails for our abject worship of bigness. In short, he sees us sold out, bag and baggage, to machine civilization, to a civilization based on machine production, minute division of labor, standardization of product and quantity output.

Obviously, within the limits of this brief paper, I cannot do more than jot down a few random reactions to M. Capek's indictment. Certainly I shall not undertake to dispute in toto his contentions, for I agree, as most literate Americans agree, with many of M. Capek's criticisms. I dissent heartily, however, from the major conclusion that may be read between his lines—the conclusion that machine civilization is a dragon that must be slain if we are to save our souls. I refuse to bind myself to the cart-tail of any such fatalism.

If we are to play St. George to the Dragon of modern industrialism, it will be the part of wisdom, I think, to try to domesticate it before we consider destroying it. But more of this a bit later.

Before passing to specific comment on M. Capek's bill of particulars, I should like to confess that I am a bit sick of the cultural snobbery of the professional European and of the flunkey-mindedness of many Americans in the presence of anything European. One can hardly go through a season in New York without growing tired of the psychopathic genuflections (Continued on Page 22)

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before mildewed Lords and tarnished Ladies just because they are European.

We may admit, I think, that in respect of art, of culture and of statesmanship, in Europe more heads rise above the human plane and rise higher than in America, but, in matters of material comfort, economic security and educational advantages for the mass of average men and women, the human plane is higher here than in Europe, and in time our quota of exceptions will fill up. We are a young society, as the historian looks at things, so give us time.

We may admit, I think, that in America just now the men of congenital superiority are not flocking into non-material fields in quest of careers. Industry and finance are attracting men who, in a more mature society, would enrich the arts and the sciences. Men are becoming bankers and business men who, in an older and more balanced social order, would be writing our books, painting our pictures, making forays on the frontiers of science, bringing the power of living prophecy to the sullen snarlings of our religious controversies and serving on our university Faculties as guides of growing youth in the high adventure of making itself at home in the modern world. The annual crop of college graduates in America betrays a singularly materialistic appetite in the selection of vocations.

Leisure Class Still Young

But have the men of congenital superiority ever, under any sort of social order, pre-machine or post-machine, flocked into non-material fields in quest of careers, save from a leisure class that has been matured by generations of fine heredity and favorable environment, freed by economic security from the urge to acquire, and enriched in outlook by long cultural traditions? Our leisure class is too young. Give it its nouveau riche adolescence and we may see.

Meanwhile, America, for all her materialism and her machinery, keeps a career decently open to the talented. We are still socially fluid. There is evidence of a growing stratification of classes, but there are still hatchways through which the able and the determined may crawl up or the weak and the worthless drop down from the class of craft status into which they are born.

And I cannot agree that we worship at the shrine of material success with the single-mindedness of which M. Capek accuses us. I do not know a people more pathetically reverential in the presence of brains and of genuine achievement in non-material fields. The very weakness of the materially successful for "lion hunting" among authentic celebrities may well be a sort of shy confession of faith in the importance of things of the mind and of the spirit.

M. Capek rightly warns us against a soul-killing speed that turns a man into a machine. There is no defense of an industry that attempts to make the overspeeding of labor take the place of statesmanlike industrial management. Men might better be leisurely slaves in sunny fields than overspeeded freemen in factories. But I suggest that a machine civilization need not mean the overspeeding of labor and the turning of men into machines.

Given a little more statesmanship among the captains of industry, and this machine civilization will make it possible for men to earn larger incomes in shorter hours and to stake out larger and larger areas of leisure in their lives. I am aware that this is the same sort of promise that was thrown to mankind when steam and machinery were first harnessed in the dawn of the industrial revolution. And I know that, up to date, as "labor-saving" devices have increased, men have had to work harder, and that as "time-saving" devices have increased men have had less leisure.

But this is because industrial management has missed its appointment with destiny. And, too, it was not until day before yesterday, historically speaking, that the apparatus of machine civilization had reached the size and the efficiency that really justified the hope that, under statesmanlike guidance, it might become the savior instead of the slayer of mankind.

As we perfect the processes and procedures of mass production and mass distribution we shall see the emergence of more and more captains of industry who, in the simple prosecution of a successful business, will raise wages, shorten hours, lower prices and increase total profits at one and the same time. By this route, and by this route alone, it seems to me, can modern men arrive at the goal of adequate leisure for full and abundant living.

We are wasting our time when we join the "shepherds of Arcady" and sigh wistfully for a leisurely and gossip handiwork world in which workmen, during working hours, may between the laying of two bricks "chat a little, drink beer, expectorate, and scratch their backs." The machine is here to stay. M. Capek's Europe will build and buy more and more machines. And then Europe as well as America must decide whether mankind will master its machines or be mastered by them.

If and when we master our machines and, by the grace of their speedy production and quantity output, gain adequate leisure, we shall face the long adventure of learning what to do with leisure. At first we shall undoubtedly waste it. But that will not prove that leisure is baneful. Emerging from a long slavery, slaves do not learn overnight how freemen should act. Even now we are challenged to develop an adult education that shall help Americans to know what to do with their minds after office hours.

We need more leisure in our lives. M. Capek cannot insist too much on this point. But we shall gain it by developing our machine civilization, not by running away from it. There are not enough islands for all of us to turn Robinson Crusoe. When we gain a greater leisure, depend upon it, we shall sooner or later learn how to use it, and then the Capeks will have less justification for lecturing us upon shoddy conceptions of success and fanatical pride in mere bulk and bigness.

The Two Major Philosophies

Two major philosophies are battling for control of the future of this materialistic and mechanized civilization of ours. One is the philosophy of the social mystic; the other is the philosophy of the engineer. If I may be permitted to use these terms rather loosely, the social mystic is represented by a man like Mahatma Gandhi, and the engineer is represented by a man like Henry Ford. It is interesting to note, as Drew Pearson has pointed out, that Gandhi, who is an uncompromising enemy of machine civilization, and Ford, who is an ardent champion of machine civilization, agree very largely in their verdict on the unhappy results of our industrial society up to date.

They agree that the machine has been the master of man and man must become the master of the machine, but they part company when they begin to discuss ways and means of achieving this end, Gandhi going the way of the social mystic, Ford going the way of the engineer. Gandhi and Ford agree that industry should be decentralized out of great industrial cities, where congestion breeds its ugly offspring, but they would accomplish this decentralization in widely different ways.

Both would take industry back to the villages and coordinate it with farming, so that the men of the countryside could alternate between agricultural and industrial production; but Gandhi would do it by smashing the machines and installing the ancient spinning wheel in

the farmer's cottage, while Ford would do it by putting small factories on the River Rouge for the making of carburetor valves, generator cutouts and magneto parts for his car.

I am, for the time being at least, a citizen of Wisconsin, and this possibility of decentralizing production out of the great industrial centres, making standardized parts in small factories located on rural streams and manned by farm labor in the time it is not giving to its agricultural work, and converting the great central industrial establishments into assembling plants only, seems to me to contain fascinating possibilities for a State like Wisconsin, which finds growing up alongside its admirably administered agricultural life a great industrial life. It would be an unhappy future, indeed, if in Wisconsin and other American States the forces of agriculture and the forces of industry were to develop as two vast and permanently antagonistic social enterprises.

The vision of the engineer and the far-sighted captain of industry may make possible a new correlation of agricultural and industrial production that will give to the productive life of America a stability it has never known and give to the producers of America a margin of income and a margin of leisure they have never known.

I inject this specific picture into this article of generalizations to suggest the sort of social by-products that may come from machine civilization when we become its masters rather than its victims.

All in all, I am betting on the engineer rather than upon the social mystic and the "shepherds of Arcady" to gain and to guard for us a carefree leisure in which we may laugh and love and adventure among the things of the mind and the spirit.