CORRESPONDENCE

MR. HAROLD COX AND COMPULSORY STERILISATION.

To the Editor of BLACKFRIARS.

SIR,

I regret that I had not time to reply, soon enough for inclusion in the last issue of BLACKFRIARS, to Mr. Harold Cox's courteous complaint about my treatment of one of the most controversial chapters of his book.

Mr. Cox himself repeats the passage which I have quoted as apparently showing (and I expressed my astonishment at having discovered it in Mr. Cox's writings) that he advocated the 'compulsory sterilisation, by State appointed practitioners, of large classes of mankind.' His exact words were: 'Those persons, who as the result of physical or mental defects, are unfitted to produce children should be sterilised, with their consent or with the consent of their guardians, at the expense of the State.' I quoted this sentence purposely because it is Mr. Cox's own deliberate summing up of several pages of argument. Mr. Cox complains now that his earlier pages contradicted my interpretation of what he actually said, but I cannot honestly say that I regard my interpretation of it as exaggerated.

If I were discussing the question with a State Socialist I would naturally have attached more significance to Mr. Cox's qualification which requires 'their consent or the consent of their guardians': for State Socialists usually have unbounded faith in the efficacy of such stipulations to restrict the power of bureaucracies. But I should have thought that Mr. Cox would naturally be the first to admit that, if once the principle of State interference with any human liberty is tolerated, the weak and the defenceless will always suffer from an abuse of the powers so conferred upon the State.

Even if the personal consent of mental defectives, for instance, or of people suffering from any disease that involves much pain, is asked for and obtained, does not this in itself leave the way open to all State-appointed doctors who happen to be fanatics about Malthusian theories, either to exploit the credulity of their patients or to bring unfair pressure to bear

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upon them to convince them of what such doctors themselves regard as the moral obligation to accept sterilisation? I cannot feel that even a strict insistence upon personal consent would be worth much as a guarantee in such circumstances for what is, after all, one of the most sacred of human rights.

But Mr. Cox does not even insist upon such personal consent. He would be satisfied with 'the consent of their guardians.' And if so, may we ask at what age? Are guardians to be allowed—indeed encouraged by people who think as Mr. Cox thinks—to have children sterilised at the expense of the tax-payers simply because they suffer from some defect or disease for which the doctors have not yet found the cure but which may become curable within ten years time?

Mr. Cox would presumably reply that this right to sterilise would always be conscientiously applied. I wonder would it? For instance, where large inheritances are concerned? Under present conditions it surely happens often enough that people who are not insane are certified into lunatic asylums through the agency, whether direct or indirect, of men and women who want to obtain control of their money, and who make some eccentricity the pretext for having their relatives incarcerated. If to the power to certify one's relatives as insane is added the power absolutely to prevent them from having children, what terrors will in future surround anyone who has property to leave, or even expectations of inheriting!

Even admitting all that is to be said against the unrestricted procreation of the unfit by imbecile parents, is Mr. Cox, as one of the last champions of individual liberty in modern England, really prepared to grant such appalling powers to the future Ministries of Health?

I confess that Mr. Cox's requirement of personal consent to sterilisation leaves me unconvinced. As for the 'consent of their guardians,' does it not quite obviously imply the compulsory sterilisation of their victims if the guardians do give such consent? If Mr. Cox assumes that all people who are under the jurisdiction of guardians are unfit to decide such questions for themselves, and that therefore 'the question does not arise,' I can only refer the issue between us to the judgment of any solicitor or doctor with a fairly wide experience.

Yours very truly,

DENIS GWYNN.

PARAMÉ, BRITTANY.

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