Father Coughlin at the Garden

"M"Y friends, if we are forced to see $19 or even $50 a month paid for such [relief] work in what we call the New Deal, then this plutocratic capitalistic system must be constitutionally voted out of existence." This sentence, apparently interpolated in Father Coughlin's Madison Square Garden speech, since it does not appear in the full texts as published in both the Times and the Herald Tribune, is the most revealing utterance in that address. According to the Times, "there was a moment's silence as these words sank into the consciousness of the crowd. Then a roar broke out and lasted with almost deafening intensity for one full minute." The crowd of more than 20,000 middle-class individuals—they had paid from 50 cents to $2 for their seats—was roaring at the prospect of the abolition of capitalism. What does it mean? To Father Coughlin? To these middle-class people?

If the plutocratic capitalistic system is to be voted out of existence, something is to replace it. Father Coughlin only intimated what it might be. It will be another capitalistic system, since communism has a "hatred of God and of private property." "Civilization," he said, "cannot prosper unless the natural right to private property is protected." It will be based ostensibly on the solidarity of laborer, farmer, soldier, and merchant, working together for God and country. Small manufacturers also will have a place in it. It will be conducted on behalf of this group, in opposition to the interests of bankers and big industry. And its chief delight will be in the control of money. Aside from the idée fixe of money, a peculiarity of American middle-class radicalism, this conception is almost identical with the underlying idea of national socialism in Germany and of fascism in Italy in the years before they came into power. The union of laborer, farmer, soldier, and merchant might have been culled from Mussolini's speeches before the march on Rome. Hitler appealed for a similar national concentration, and spoke as disrespectfully of big industrialists and even more so of bankers, since most of them were Jews. And it is significant that Father Coughlin made his well-timed entry into Madison Square Garden with an escort from the National War Veterans' Association. As the patron saint of the bonus he becomes the political leader of common soldiers, as were Hitler and Mussolini.

Now Father Coughlin did not speak as a fascist, and he opened his speech by repudiating fascism and communism. He did not repudiate democracy; on the contrary this word, strangely missing from earlier discourses, was sprinkled profusely through the address. He has learned a good deal since the Union for Social Justice was born in his mind. He now knows it is good policy to espouse democracy and denounce dictatorships. Possibly his close friend Mr. Hearst has taught him that. Similarly he has purged his utterances of innuendos against the American Federation of Labor, which he used formerly to attack with as much scorn as he showed toward the bankers. The A. F. of L. has even been promoted to be one of the spokes of the social wheel of which the National Union for Social Justice is to be the hub.

A year ago he wanted to protect labor from the A. F. of L. and place the organization and direction of labor unions under government control without the right to strike. Now he supports the Wagner labor-disputes bill, and when Senator Wagner, a veteran in the fight for labor, was booted for his stand against the bonus, the freshman labor recruit patronized him: "Give him a chance, ladies and gentlemen, give him a chance. He has taken up the cause of labor." This intellectual dishonesty is characteristic of the demagogic method. Father Coughlin was careful to say he did not aspire to office, and was "forever precluded" from it by being a priest. He also urged the members of his league to work within their existing parties. No doubt he will use this approach to power as long as it succeeds. His union might even rule through existing democratic machinery after it gained control of the country, and Father Coughlin might be dictator without portfolio. The forms are not what matters. What is important is the conflict that lies ahead, and how it is settled. Father Coughlin, aiming at a capitalism based on private property, says he will wrest power from big industry and finance. If his following grows, as similar movements did in Germany and Italy, it will ultimately make its peace with big industry and finance, and if it obtains control we shall be ruled by the same kind of fascist oligarchy.

It is a coincidence that Father Coughlin should have been speaking in New York on the same day that President Roosevelt was delivering a personal veto before Congress. The people, in electing a President, intrust to a single individual the right of veto over acts of Congress. In Washington the President was exercising this right legitimately, and we think wisely, in overruling the Patman bill. But the point we wish to stress is that Father Coughlin was asking on the same day for a veto power which is not legitimate. The "national lobby" idea has no place in our scheme of government. For Father Coughlin's union is not a lobby in any accepted sense; it is a party which refuses to accept the responsibilities and hazards of an open struggle for political power. The "pressure" system enables Father Coughlin to remain vague, to choose his own time and place for public and radio appearances, beyond the reach of questions, debate, and popular repudiation. Father Coughlin told his New York audience he would not make his union a third party. We should consider him a menace if he did; but he is a far more serious menace if he does not.

Hitler's National Socialist Party was more democratic in that it presented itself repeatedly at the polls, and finally came into power through the front door. Father Coughlin artfully stays at the back door, ready to make a short cut to the dais. His Union for Social Justice is a piece of effrontery, as disquieting as it is arrant. And we can only regret that the President, who also must be disquieted since he finds it advisable to make concessions to this man, has not disarmed him and the other demagogues by himself assuming the leadership of the left.