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## *The Changing World: The BBC's educational response to the economic crisis of 1931*

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“History of the Media in Transition Periods”

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**6 September 9.00**

## ***The Changing World: The BBC’s educational response to the economic crisis of 1931***

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### **Abstract**

In Autumn 1931 and Spring 1932, at a time of global and national economic crisis, the BBC subsumed all its adult education radio broadcasts under the title *The Changing World*. The series was described in promotional literature as ‘an attempt ... to face up squarely to the present situation, and to provide a survey of the many changes in outward circumstance, and in the evolution of thought and of values, which have brought into being the world as it is to-day.’

*The Changing World* comprised 144 broadcasts, each lasting around 25 minutes. The broadcasts were presented by eminent figures, such as the poet T. S. Eliot, the writer Harold Nicolson, the scientist Julian Huxley, and the economist William Beveridge. All talks were transmitted at ‘prime time’ in the early evening, and were intended for general listeners. In addition, associated pamphlets were published by the BBC in which speakers developed their thoughts.

The series was avowedly based on the premise that the contemporary crisis was a singular historical episode, calling for special consideration. Its roots lay in the cataclysm of the First World War, but it was also a manifestation of the many conflicting philosophies which ran through public life: socialism versus capitalism; nationalism versus internationalism; science (or secularism) versus spirituality; and modernism versus classicism. The crisis was seen as pervading most areas of cultural, creative and economic life, such as politics, the arts, science, and education.

In another sense, though, the series was very much a product of its time. Broadcast radio, and in particular public service broadcasting, was barely ten years old, but in that short time it had developed from a specialist, minority pursuit to a cultural and educational resource in the lives of most of the population. This paper argues that *The Changing World* therefore represents a

coming -of-age of radio – a realisation among its staff that it was especially fitted to tackle momentous topics on behalf of the public. The series marks a growing confidence among broadcasting practitioners in the medium, and a growing self-confidence in themselves as professional intermediaries between the public and the intellectual world.

The talk draws on original, unpublished archive material relating to the series, and on associated publications. Although no sound recordings of the series survive, many of the talks were published. Extracts from the talks give an impression of the approaches and styles, and internal BBC documents indicate the ambition and scope of the producers. Reviews and comments also indicate the reception of the series. The paper also locates *The Changing World* in the context of the BBC's own historical development, and its sometimes uneasy political position as a quasi-autonomous body which was nevertheless subject in various ways to government pressure.

The economic crisis of 1931 was precipitated by the crash on the New York stock exchange in 1929. Among its many ramifications, several countries – including the USA – imposed import tariffs, and the UK's exports declined steeply. The decline in British industrial activity led to a rise in unemployment. The situation was not helped by the fact that the UK, like several other countries, had tied the value of its currency to gold (the gold standard), but this could only be maintained if stocks of gold were held in amounts that supported the amount of currency in circulation.

As concern about the UK's economic position increased, investors took their gold out of the country. The position became critical in August 1931, when it became clear that the UK could not balance its books unless it could secure loans from abroad; and loans came with strings attached. The British government would have to embark on series of cost cutting measures, prominent among which were reducing unemployment benefits and reducing the salaries of some public sector workers. As the government of the time was a Labour government, elected two years earlier with a policy of increasing welfare benefits, these strategies did not go down well with voters and party members. At the height of the crisis in August 1931, the Prime Minister dissolved his cabinet and instituted a National Government, which was a coalition in all but name. A general election was called in October 1931.

This crisis had a particularly apocalyptic feel, and not just in the UK. The British historian Arnold J. Toynbee wrote:

In 1931 men and women all over the world were seriously contemplating and frankly discussing the possibility that the Western system of Society might break down and cease to work.

[From 1920 until 1946, the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee edited a series of annual reviews called the *Survey of International Affairs*. This is from the volume for 1932]

It's the BBC's educational response to this crisis that I'm concerned with here. It went under the title 'The Changing World', and the prime mover was Mary Adams, who was what we would now call a producer in the BBC's Adult Education department. Adams (I assume) wrote:

For some time past a sense of crisis has been abroad, which has led many to wonder what can be the outcome of our present troubles. This perplexity goes to the very roots of life, and affects us, not only in the economic and social sphere, but is all-pervasive, setting its seal on art and upon literature, and upon all expressions of the human spirit. It is quite plain that everyone is concerned about the future, and is searching anxiously, at once for new knowledge and a proper understanding of their present state, and for, the means of the solution of their difficulties.

In [*The Changing World*], an attempt is, therefore, made to face up squarely to the present situation, and to provide a survey of the many changes in outward circumstance, and in the evolution of thought and of values, which have brought into being the world as it is to-day. The preoccupation of the speakers in all the separate series will be the same. All will be attempting, according as their subject makes it possible, to answer three questions, and thereby to help to a fuller understanding of the present and the future. These are the questions which the speakers will be putting to themselves.

What have been the forces of change which within my subject have had effect within the present century?

What has been the influence upon social thought and circumstance, upon our ways of life, the way we think and look at things, of these same forces of transformation?

What is the significance to the future of these changes, and what responsibility rests with us in the light of this new knowledge to remodel our ways of life, the machinery of government, and the relations of mankind throughout the world?

I'll show you in a moment what all this amounted to in terms of broadcast output. But it's worth examining what Adams is saying here.

Note the apocalyptic tone. Everyone is concerned, everyone is implicated. The malaise affects all areas of life and all parts of society. Note also the high ambition. *The Changing World* is going to look at how we got to our present state, and various experts are going to explain what they see as the way forward.

Bear in mind that broadcasting in the UK had existed for only 10 years, and yet a BBC producer thinks it quite appropriate that her organisation should take on a project like this.

## Changing World timetable

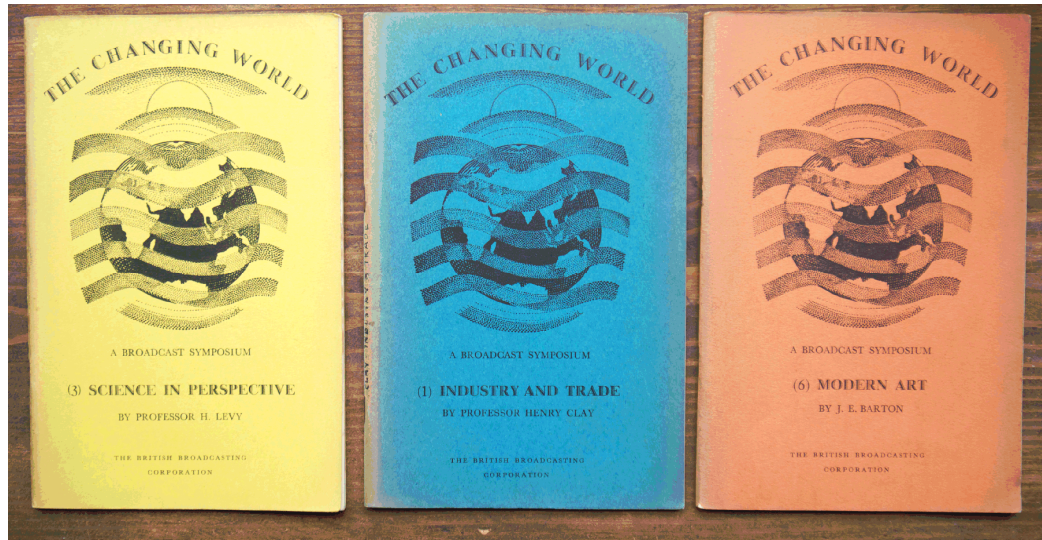
		<b>THE CHANGING WORLD</b>	
		SEPTEMBER TO DECEMBER 1931	JANUARY TO MARCH 1932
Sundays 5.0-5.30 p.m. Regional		<b>THE MODERN DILEMMA</b> MR. CHRISTOPHER DAWSON, PROF. JOHN MACMURRAY, MR. T. S. ELIOT, AND OTHERS (24 Talks)	
Mondays 7.30-8.0 p.m. National	6.30-7.00 p.m. National FRENCH LANGUAGE TALKS M. E. M. STEPHAN	<b>INDUSTRY AND TRADE</b> <i>HOW WEALTH HAS INCREASED</i> PROF. ARNOLD PLANT (6 Talks)	<i>WHY DOES POVERTY CONTINUE?</i> MR. D. H. ROBERTSON (6 Talks) <i>HOW HAS PRIVATE ENTERPRISE ADAPTED ITSELF?</i> PROF. HENRY CLAY (6 Talks) <i>HOW HAS THE STATE MET THE CHANGE?</i> PROF. HENRY CLAY, PROF. ARNOLD PLANT, MR. D. H. ROBERTSON (6 Talks)
Tuesdays 8.30-9.0 p.m. National		<b>LITERATURE AND ART</b>	
		<i>THE NEW SPIRIT IN LITERATURE</i> HON. HAROLD NICOLSON (12 Talks)	<i>THE DRAMA</i> SIR BARRY JACKSON (2 Talks) <i>THE PRESS</i> MR. KINGSLEY MARTIN (4 Talks) <i>MODERN ART</i> MR. J. E. BARTON (6 Talks)
Wednesdays 7.30-8.0 p.m. National		<b>SCIENCE</b>	
		<i>WHAT IS SCIENCE?</i> PROF. H. LEVY (6 Talks) <i>WHAT IS MAN?</i> PROF. JULIAN HUXLEY DR. JOHN BAKER (6 Talks)	<i>SCIENCE AND CIVILIZATION</i> A Symposium (6 Talks) <i>SCIENCE IN THE MAKING, SERIES II: CHANGES IN FAMILY LIFE.</i> SIR WILLIAM BEVERIDGE AND OTHERS (6 Talks)
Thursdays 7.30-8.0 p.m. National	6.30-7.30 p.m. National GERMAN LANGUAGE TALKS MR. OTTO SEIPMANN	<b>THE MODERN STATE</b>	
		<i>CAN DEMOCRACY SURVIVE?</i> MR. LEONARD WOOLF AND LORD EUSTACE PERCY (12 Talks)	<i>DISEASES OF ORGANIZED SOCIETY</i> MRS. SIDNEY WEBB (3 Talks) <i>HAS PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT FAILED?</i> PROF. W. G. S. ADAMS (3 Talks) <i>THE PROBLEM OF WORLD GOVERNMENT</i> SIR ARTHUR SALTER (6 Talks)
Fridays 7.30-8.0 p.m. National		<b>EDUCATION AND LEISURE</b>	
		<i>LEARNING TO LIVE</i> PROF. JOHN MACMURRAY, PROF. J. DOVER WILSON, SIR PERCY NUNN (12 Talks) <i>MODERN LIFE AND MODERN LEISURE</i> PROF. C. DELISLE BURNS (12 Talks)	

Each row represents a different subject area

Each row contains 24 talks (around 20-30 minutes)

Big names: T. S. Eliot, Leonard Woolf, William Beveridge, Julian Huxley, Sidney Webb.

In addition, for each topic theme or row there was an introductory booklet. Three shown here.



Now, as an academic researching this, how does one even get hold of the raw material?

Quite a lot of talks, but by no means all, were printed each week in *The Listener*, a weekly magazine published by the BBC. Typically each week there might be three of that week's talks reprinted in *The Listener*. As you can see, that would give you half the talks if it were consistently maintained. The trouble is it dropped below three some weeks, and I don't think it ever went above.

Some of the talks were published as books. That applies to the Science series and The Modern State, and parts of other series. I'm still trying to establish how many of these talks have survived in a published form. My guess at the moment is that it's probably around a half, maybe approaching two-thirds.

One thing that's clear from my limited perusal of the published versions is that the contemporary economic crisis isn't really the focus, and that's not surprising. A programme of 144 talks can't be put together in a matter of weeks. At the end of May 1931, Mary Adams wrote to Hyman Levy, who gave some of the science talks:

'We are planning a connected series of talks on Forces of Social Transformation in the Modern World and are proposing to devote Tuesday

evenings throughout next autumn and spring to a discussion of scientific problems.’

There’s nothing there about the immediate crisis, and in a sense the severe crisis of 1931 had not yet happened. It looks as though there was a degree of opportunism in making the connection. All the same, as Adams herself said, there had been a general feeling of foreboding for some time.

### **Levy v. Plant**

By bringing all these talks under a common theme, addressing a contemporary issue, Adams seemed to think, or hope, that useful cross-fertilisation of ideas about social change would take place. Presumably this was behind her decision to have broadcast discussions between speakers from different disciplines. One of her ideas was for the mathematician Hyman Levy, who had given several science talks, to hold a discussion with the economist Arnold Plant, who had given several talks in the Industry and Trade strand. In the nature of broadcasting at that time, such a discussion would be prepared, so Levy and Plant met off-air a few weeks before the proposed broadcast.

Levy wrote to Adams (7 December 1931) about the meeting:

When I came away from my discussion with Plant last week I did not feel very hopeful that anything useful would mature. It seemed to me that he took up such an extraordinarily laissez faire attitude that as far as he was concerned the community could go hang and he would be happy provided he saw exactly how it was so going.

If he would not commit himself to anything it was going to be difficult to find sufficient common argumentative ground. You might as well expect a meteorologist and a bibliographer to argue about the effects of rain on the pursuit of their respective subjects. The fact is of course that Plant seems to regard Economics entirely as an Observational Science and his laissez faire attitude not merely prevents him from doing experiments within his field but seems to inhibit him from considering even hypothetical experiments.

Despite Levy’s misgivings, a discussion between Levy and Plant went ahead of 31 December 1931, and an shortened transcript appeared in *The Listener*:



## Does Industry Give Science a Chance?

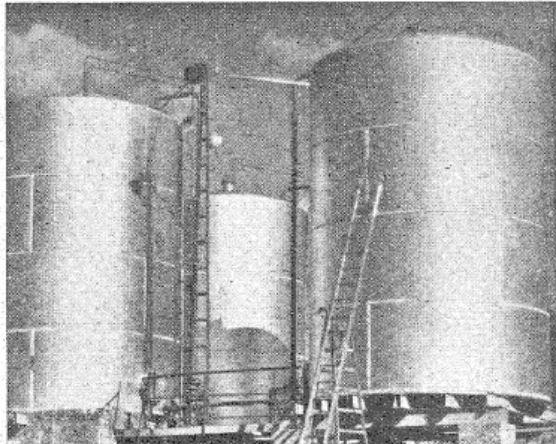
An Abridged Report of the recent Discussion between Professor ARNOLD PLANT and Professor H. LEVY

PROFESSOR ARNOLD PLANT: I was much interested in the views which you expressed in the fifth of your recent talks. You were discussing the way in which industry uses, or fails to use, the theoretical ideas of pure science. You said some hard words; you said 'I say deliberately that in this country industrialists have lamentably failed here; among the multitude of industrial activities on whose success the country rests there are scarcely half a dozen which have been far seeing enough to give attention to this problem. And for the want of an effective channel the great mass of pure scientific knowledge lies industrially sterile in the archives of the learned societies'. There are one or two conclusions which you drew which I want to discuss with you. Let us assume to start with, that this mass of pure but industrially sterile scientific knowledge is capable of use. That is not necessarily true, of course, and you scientists probably do well to disregard the likelihood of your results being useful in productive industry. When you are engaged in the pursuit of truth it is certainly undesirable, if not actually unwise, that you should be concerned with the possible usefulness of that truth, should you find it.

H. L.: Oh, yes, I agree!  
A. P.: But leaving that on one side and coming back to the disastrous 'pan' which you said you

how specialised—that does not call for a wide knowledge of many branches of science. The investigator for a small firm may find himself in a position of having to be simultaneously chemist, physicist, mathematician, engineer and even biologist. Even an economist must know that that is an impossible situation. And when there is at the same time pressure from the directors of a firm with slender resources to produce results quickly you can imagine the quality the poor scientist is finally reduced to offering. It may well be argued that research does not pay under these conditions.

A. P.: I agree with you that small firms cannot adequately undertake many kinds of industrial research so long as they work in isolation. That is why I stress the importance of collective effort through joint research institutes. Of course, no one form of industrial organisation—competition or monopoly—secures all the advantages and avoids all the weaknesses. But surely there is one real danger in planning industry in one big unit so as to prevent competition. The danger is this: that the rate of industrial improvement may then be slowed down to maintain the value of capital invested in the existing plant. New inventions make existing machinery obsolete and valueless. But when a number of separate firms are competing, a new invention



During the discussion, things got a bit lively. Plant's position was pro-market forces. In his view, competitive markets led to benefits all round. The more the competition, the more everyone gained:

A. P.: ... But when a number of separate firms are competing, a new invention which cuts production costs will be introduced by one or other of the competing firms ... The general public then secures the benefit of the new knowledge or the new invention without the delay which vested interests would be likely to impose. But where monopoly [i.e. state monopoly] rules, the preferences of the public may be thwarted ... This is the danger I fear – that [with an absence of competition] the rate of progress will be checked by the prevention of competition.

Levy noticed how proponents of competition tended to be quite selective about its application, and were inclined to exempt themselves:

H. L.: Why this mystical belief in the efficacy of competition? You claim that economics is a science. Do you set about solving an economic problem by competing with your fellow economists in an attempt to discover a solution? Why not try to discover the best method by experiment? Isn't it about time we carried through one or two deliberately controlled industrial



experiments on a large scale so that we can agree about something?

Unrestricted competition has had its trial, a long one, and this is the pass to which we have come – international unemployment.

Plant, though, was evidently a resourceful debater:

A. P.: Of course, I could talk for hours in reply to that. First of all, there is no essential opposition between competition and co-operation. Free competition is the most effective means of co-operation; it is the absence of free competition, and excessive State interference with it, which has caused unemployment and prolonged the depression.

And on it goes. It is an unusually fascinating discussion, not least for revealing the inseparable gulf between these two speakers. Did bringing them together shed light on the crisis, or did it merely reveal that people had their own, mutually incompatible explanations, to which they adhered? Answering that question would require a study of far more of the material than I have been able to examine.

## **Transition**

A theme of this conference is ‘time of transition’, and when I read that I wondered whether anyone can ever tell whether they are in a period of transition, or whether periods of transition are only apparent in hindsight.

Certainly all people I’ve been quoting here all knew they were in a period of *crisis*, but transition? They could have had no conception what the outcome of the crisis would be. Actually, Levy does say during *The Changing World* that we are in a period of transition, but he was talking on a large scale, making the familiar argument that the world he lived in was not one that human’s had evolved to cope with. As an ‘explanation’, this has virtually zero explanatory power.

As historians we can interpret this period as transitional in several ways. From the geopolitical point of view, it was almost the start of the 1930s depression which had its ultimate resolution in a World War, after which came the institution of a welfare state in many countries (including Britain). Levy would have approved of the post-war development, whereas Plant, certainly on his 1931 showing, could be expected to have had theoretical objections.

From the economic point of view, there was quite a clear and quick transition. Britain severed the connection of its currency to the value of gold, and the exchange rate of Stirling found a new value determined by market forces. Effectively the pound was devalued. British exports became cheaper and imports dearer, and the national balance of payments was soon much healthier. According to one historian, ‘the tremendous

imbalance of trade that had been behind the crisis of 1931 disappeared within two years' (Bentley B. Gilbert, *Britain Since 1918* 2nd ed., Batsford 1980, p. 80).

But there's another respect in which the period I've been talking was transitional, and that's in relation to broadcasting. The scale of the project was huge. 144 30-minute programmes, over six months; and associated publications. This was all part of an educational mission of the BBC. Listeners were encouraged to join together in local groups, to listen as a group, and to discuss the issues raised. The BBC supplied additional print materials for such groups.

The BBC never attempted a project as big as this again, at least not in the pre-war period, and by 1935 this overtly educational mission was crumbling. Many of the key staff, including Mary Adams, left after what might be called a management putsch. Mary Adams's department was largely dismantled. It didn't disappear, but things were never the same again. This kind of ambitious, high minded programming was scaled back. Probing examinations of contemporary issues remained, of course, but it tended to be in pockets here and there (as it is now), rather than spread over prime time listening. This period was a transition to a different conception of how broadcasting should be conducted.