

CYNICISM AS A NECESSITY

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THERE are times both in the life-history of man and in the life-history of a civilization when cynicism acquires an excellent reason for existence. And when this stage is reached, its poking force is very much more in order than any beautifully expressed belief in man, or any everlasting faith in his progress. To show that we have reached this point in our economic and social evolution is the purpose of what follows.

Cynicism, as has often been pointed out, is nothing more than a thwarted, inverted idealism. And to seek reasons for this doubting, skeptical slant on life, we have only to refer to that concentrated mirror of our time—the newspaper. Individuals to whom the news perusal habit has not become a brain deadening drug usually find in the fat, advertising-filled journals an unfailing cause of profound depression. The insane proceedings of leagues and committees, the platitudinous statements of eminent public figures, the sordid interest in petty crimes, the stories of graft-infested cities, and the generally stupid utterances of powerful officials,—these certainly are not conducive to any soul-stirring optimism.

Considering the conditions which prevail in large urban centers, where millions of people live on a few square miles of the earth's surface without any stabilizing attachment to the soil or to an art, it will be seen that the attitude of cynicism is the only one that will assert the individual. Surrounded at every hand by influences which never cease to stress his smallness and unimportance, he must, if he wishes to exist as a human being and not as a member of a mob, assume a belligerent attitude—the only one that will enable him to maintain his precious consciousness of self.

Therefore he commences to look about critically; he begins to

resist the omnipresent influence of the skyscrapers and huge buildings which tend to depress his ego. If he lets himself be permeated with the feeling that he is a weak creature living in the shadow of things that are strong, powerful, eternal—then he automatically surrenders his spiritual freedom. It follows of necessity that he will regard whatever he finds established very uncritically. For how can he, a solitary helpless mortal, dare to look askance at what is ever so much stronger than he is?

Thus we have in our complicated transit systems, in our large industrial enterprises, in our towering apartment houses, and in our endless city crowds, forces that tend to destroy the independence of the individual and to make of him nothing more than a spiritless type. If men with the gifts of a Dante or a Goethe were to grow up in this chilly environment, in all probability they would have to protect their personalities with the armor of cynicism in order to avoid being crushed. The chances are that their work would contain the satirical thrusting element to a great degree. For they would at all costs have succumbed to the necessity of escaping this feeling of comparative smallness which the city surroundings are so apt to induce.

It is indeed true that the creators of the city's glories were men like ourselves; that they did their work well; and that they derived the greatest pleasure from their successes. But it is also true that the succeeding generations find the atmosphere of *things done* into which they are born intensely stifling. Ease and comfort are there, to be sure; but as far as the utilization of the creative energies of youth goes, opportunities are sadly lacking. We cannot escape the fact that human beings must fill the thousands of small jobs which the industrial pioneers succeeded in developing; and that human beings must fit into the ponderous institutions which men of great foresight and abilities had brought into existence.

This, in short, is the situation which to an ever increasing extent exists in our great cities today. Anyone who has had the uncomfortable experience of looking for a job will recognize the truth of the psychological effects noted above. The best of the young men, the type who might have been pioneers themselves, given the proper conditions, actively resent the predicament into which their late arrival has forced them. If they should rebelliously attempt to strike out for themselves, it is quite possible that they may succeed

in attaining an independent economic foothold; but in most cases, because of the competition from large organizations, the odds are definitely against them.

In most cases these rebels learn to restrain their feelings, especially after their lack of restraint is quickly followed by a sharp awareness that one must live and eat. So they jump into small jobs, work hard, and optimistically hope that promotion will soon follow to soothe their hamstringed ambitions. As for the rest—the great majority of young men, they easily fall into line, happy to secure a safe berth and destined to remain forever oblivious of the fact that their abilities have had no outlet.

It is in the bottled energies of the former more restless class, however, that a society finds a destructive cleansing force. The resentment and the hatred that the suppression engenders soon manifests itself in a desire to pull down, to destroy—and then to build anew. After all, this tendency is a healthy one, for it puts to test the different parts of the inherited economic and social organisms. And if these products of the labor of old men and dead men cannot change to meet conditions, or cannot survive the rigors of a stock-taking, then it is best that they be replaced by those that can.

Man has never looked kindly at the dynamic element in life. Where the human body was concerned he could do nothing but submit to old age and death; but where the achievements of his own brain and skill entered, he strained every nerve and muscle to win permanence. He built for the next generation, he planned for years to come, he created institutions which he hoped would exist forever.

What happened, however, was that the generations which succeeded these inspired builders forgot that what met their eyes was only the work of human beings like themselves. The newcomers looked, were impressed, and then prostrated themselves. They did not perceive that the objects of worship had a far from miraculous origin; and that the great structures were the products of human efforts and human errors. This point of view was impossible, for men were quickly impressed with the strength of the existing creations; they could only feel how utterly preposterous it would be for people like themselves even to think of improving or reconstructing.

But youth does not like this humbling of spirit: the more sensi-

tive and capable the individual, the more resentful he is. For the growing spring-like qualities of a civilization are always stirring in the strong-minded youth, and the consciousness of this makes him distrustful of anything that threatens to rob him of the air and light that he needs so much. He refuses to worship, he refuses to be grateful for the safety that is forced upon him; and when he takes these steps toward affirming his "self," when he takes the offensive as far as his spirit and intelligence is concerned, he falls right into the cynical mind-set. Which brings us to the question of what cynicism means.

Perhaps the best way to understand cynicism is to show how it differs from the sophistication with which it is so often confused. The cynical mind is honest: it is free of the pretence, the affected smartness, and the inane laughter of the sophisticated one. The cynical mind weighs what it sees, without allowing itself to be bluffed by any superficial appearance of solidity, pioussness, or rectitude. It laughs and questions and doubts: it tears away the coating of half-truths and lies which make difficult any true evaluation of the character of an institution or an individual. Cynicism has absolutely nothing in common with sophistication, which is a product of social decay and of spiritual senescence. The smile of the sophisticate is little more than an egoistical assertion of a weak self for the purpose of experiencing the pallid thrill of being "different." The smile of the cynic is active, it is belligerent, it requires intellectual stamina. Alongside of it the laughter of sophistication seems like bloodless sneering.

In the last analysis, the essential difference between cynicism and sophistication, or even between cynicism and the meek, receptive attitude of the great mass of people, is that the former is a rejuvenating, humanizing force, while the others are not. If man is to escape the domination of the things which clutter up his horizon, if he is to be anything besides a large piece of short-lived protoplasm, then he must rise above the brick-mortar-and-steel deities that loom up and oppress him with their invisible strength. And to do this he must learn to rely on purifying, invigorating laughter . . . the laughter that will make him superior to *things* . . . laughter that will make him free.

With this in mind, let us proceed to examine several widespread distortions present in the popular mind to an amazing degree.

Then we shall try to show how a dash of cynicism would quickly bring the needed clear-mindedness into the situation.

First we have the phenomenon of personification, by which the vast resources of large corporations are identified with the individuals who have become wealthy through their control. It is this, perhaps, more than anything else, that is at the bottom of the vast respect and reverence rendered our millionaires. Since personal contact between the subway riders and the limousine owners is impossible because of social differences, a flowery myth has grown up around the latter. They are regarded as an extraordinary people, gifted with almost superhuman powers and energies. And aided by amiable newspapers, the public reads of every activity of great wealth cliques with wonder and admiration,—whether it be fox-hunting, the purchase of million dollar paintings, or hotel horse-shows.

Now there may be no harm in the accumulation of money through commercial astuteness, or in spending it as the same astute temperament pleases. But there is something wrong when certain men possessing certain faculties which lead to great pecuniary successes, are held up as ideals for the youth, and as authorities on all questions—even educational and religious.

One important point generally overlooked is that merchant princes and small shop-keepers are fundamentally alike both in the trading nature of their occupation, and in the characteristics that their business requires. The difference between the two is chiefly one of degree of evolution, the owner of a news-stand being a potential department store owner. It is strange, therefore, to find ourselves regarding the small struggling store-keeper with commiseration and very often contempt, and at the same time looking up to his wealthier cousin with incredible awe.

Another example of loose thinking, and one more often noticed, is the elastic morality of gambling. Horse-racing, lotteries, roulette wheels, dice, pitching pennies—are all taboo as far as self-respecting and law-abiding citizens are concerned. But when it comes to gambling with the nation's industries by way of Wall Street stocks, or to speculating with apartment houses which contain the homes of hundreds of thousands of human beings, there seems to be little restraint, either from conscience or from public opinion. Or to consider the ever-increasing practice of playing

with the laws of probability, we have the large-scale gambling in the form of insurance against death, against rain, and against almost any undesirable event. Here again we see out-and-out inconsistencies, and again these are due more to surface judgments than to any recognized standard. For instance, would a man who made a fortune by rolling dice, have as secure a social position as one who made an equal amount on the stock market?

Then there is that very definite line we draw between bankers and persons who lend money on a small scale. The pawn-broker, for instance, advances comparatively small sums: he does this on proper security and he charges interest. But to the romantic public he is a figure for ridicule, and novelists and scenario writers have done little to correct this prejudice. What we cannot seem to discern is that the small money-lender is in exactly the same business as his more prosperous banker colleague, who does his work in mahogany and marble surroundings. Perhaps if men grasped this fact, the concept that the successful banker is the embodiment of all that is desirable in human beings would begin to fade.

In connection with this we should not fail to mention the awe that fills us on being introduced to an heir to a vast fortune, or to one who has already inherited great properties. Certainly if anyone is to be given credit for possessing the awesome millions, it is the man who amassed them. Regardless of the social position of his children, they certainly had nothing to do with being born to the family for the purpose of becoming the heirs. Hence any profound respect for the inheritors, or any speechlessness resulting from a meeting with the same people, is absolutely senseless.

Here again the inability to distinguish the points involved, the inability to resist being overpowered by the tremendous power implied in the feeling of wealth, is an indication of servility. And to conquer this feeling, the individual exposed to its strength must not only be aware of its unfoundedness, but he must also find it ridiculous. After a little intelligent consideration he must be able to laugh at it. For with the arrival of real understanding comes the doubt and the smile. Then he has asserted his "self"—he has asserted his right to evaluate. In other words, he has become free.

Passing from men and things to ideas, we find a bondage to the products of the printing press which is comparable to that

rendered to teen-storied buildings and well known names of social standing. It seems that men must always worship: and in the absence of a gripping religious force they fall back on the vicarious thrill derived from the use of mouth-to-mouth expressions like "service," "constructive criticism," and "cooperation." These words, representing ideas that originally were probably praise-worthy and well-founded, have swept across the country and are now being applied to innumerable situations, regardless of whether or not they fit. The strangest interpretations are made; but since these slogans are supported by the very highest authorities, it is impossible for most of us even to suspect that anything could be wrong in their indiscriminate application.

For instance, "constructive criticism" which has become so common a term in every branch of life, was probably invented to discourage petty fault-findings by carping individuals. But in its popularization, the term "destructive critic" has, as often as not, become a weapon against important and highly necessary criticism. It is being used to discourage efforts to change habits, to introduce new ideas, or to effect improvements. The average person finds his morale badly damaged when accused of criticizing things out of pure cussedness. For this reason it is often sufficient to throw the words "destructive criticism" and all that goes with it, into the face of anyone who should disagree with us, in order to put a halt to that person's annoying activities.

If we analyze the thought behind the word "cooperation" it will be quickly seen that the idea is altogether different from the one implied in its current use. It signifies willingness, a voluntary desire to help towards some end. But how do we find it being used by thousands of imitative intelligences?—Just as another way of commanding, an indirect way of getting people to follow a certain line of action without any regard for their preferences.

Of course there is still a large number of cases where it is used properly; but the point is that in countless instances the word has been perverted into a clever way for forcing people to do as they are told,—with a minimum amount of friction. Men are told that they "must cooperate" . . . What a ludicrous statement! But even more ludicrous is the fact that so few are able to perceive the humor of this inconsistency. The respect for the expression is so great, and the consciousness of its good standing among successful

men so frightening, that any sort of calm consideration of it is impossible.

As for "service," the third of this remarkable trio, it especially, has been worked almost to death in the strenuous efforts made by large organizations to create "good will." Royalty once monopolized the idea of "serving;" then statesmen got hold of it. But today it has become the precious inheritance of great industrial enterprises who hold it up as an ideal, and who try hard to instill the conviction that they are to all intents and purposes philanthropic institutions. Instead of candidly admitting that they existed for the purpose of paying dividends, and then showing that in doing so they were developing the natural resources of the nation and giving employment to thousands of citizens, they unnaturally attempt to cloak the entire business with an attitude of benevolence. The whole procedure smacks of a certain disagreeable falseness that somehow is not noticed in the general gulping down.

What it all sums up to, is that the city-bred man of today is intellectually servile and dispirited. He gives credence to ideas like those described above because he sees them in print, because they seem backed by authority. Not having been trained to sift ideas, and separated as he is from the hard sense and stabilizing strength of the soil, he soon loses his healthy and almost instinctive preference for simple reasoning. Thus in a short time he becomes as foot-loose intellectually, as the city environment forces him to become physically.

As would be expected, we find him falling easy prey to innumerable scientific charlatans. He accepts whole-heartedly, for instance, baseless generalizations concerning racial supremacy; he is absolutely convinced by scientific "experiments" which prove conclusively that the blonde flapper is more intelligent than the brunette or vice versa. He is deeply impressed by complicated equations which show the rate at which Chinese children learn spelling; he has complete faith in studies which prove that alcoholic beverages are poisonous or beneficial—depending on the newspaper.

Should he come across statements contrary to what he has considered to be true, he very meekly changes his mind. For who is he to set his hit-and-miss brain against the bulls-eye intellects of the experts? And how can he be so bold as to doubt, when his

scientific background and abilities are as nothing compared with those of the well trained specialists?

What is so much needed here is the touch of the cynic, the magic touch that would quickly strengthen the city man's intellectual backbone. For expert or no expert, he has the right to ask questions, and to demand clarification as to the general methods which led to the conclusions. Whether or not the ordinary mind is capable of understanding all the details of an experiment or of a scholarly study does not matter. What the non-technical mind can understand, is the pattern of the evidence which led to the final conclusions; for these patterns are usually of a simple logical nature, comprehensible to most, regardless of special training.

Fundamentally, we have here a situation similar to the one gone into earlier in this article. In other words, the edifice representing the accumulated learning of the times has assumed such awe-inspiring proportions that it is inducing a squelching effect of the same nature as that induced by the gigantic physical creations. Psychologically there is very little difference between the two. It is easy therefore, for unscrupulous people to take advantage of the blind reverence for whatever goes under the name of "science," and then proceed to bully the newspaper-fed public into a firm belief in unsupported assertions. When the men who laid the foundations of the sciences did their work, it was not difficult for the laymen to understand what it was all about, and how it affected them. But now, the intricacies of scientific research is so great that men are afraid to ask questions, they have even lost the basic knowledge they once had.

It is perhaps these facts, more than those generally included under the headings "Education" and "Background," that make the prevalence of the stereotyped mind easier to understand. We are all affected by physical and psychological forces that surround us: we are all affected by the symbols of authority, great power, and of permanence with which our environment is filled. Nourished and raised in this unescapable atmosphere of "things done," men cannot help but acquire a certain sameness of thought and feeling.

To sum up the points made above: If youth is to retain its freshness of spirit, its freedom of thought, and its desire to create—it must thrust aside the heavy restraining "Established" which is constantly weighing down and humbling it. If the present stage

of civilization is not the forerunner of a sickly old-age period, then its activities must be quickened with the energetic blood of youth. And to do this rejuvenating, the cynical turn of mind must be developed. The chances are that it will, whether we like it or not. To repeat, it is the doubt, the question, and the smile, which can shield the free spirit, and which puts to rout the subtle enslaving influences. We need laughter to purify man, to clear his eyes, and to bring back to him the strength and the courage that are part of his natural life.