

Kenneth Burke

II. Boring from Within

A FEW years ago? Why! not many months have passed since the time when the critics of our society had fallen upon a lean season. I mean that much was wrong, and that many people knew that much was wrong, but it was a dismal day for saying so. One could criticize capitalism only by non-capitalist standards. Judged by theological attitudes, by doctrines of refinement, by theories of valid cultural ends, the tendencies of our society were vulnerable. But such reasoning was ludicrously frail as a force to counteract the drive of prosperity itself. The scramble was on—and the more zestfully one entered the scramble, the greater booty he might pull out of it. To this there was no answer.

Now that the situation has changed, one no longer needs to adopt tenuous religious or cultural ideals as a way of attacking capitalism. One can attack capitalism by the ideals of capitalism itself. One can, in one's rebuttal, use such words as prosperity, material acquisitions, increased consumption, expansion, higher standards of living. This is a grim time for rejoicing—but it is good to know that an absurdity will finally become an absurdity, even by its own code of values. And when it does so, we must scrupulously make certain that those business men who in recent years had become business brains are consistently and effectively taunted for their difficulties. It is our pious duty to make them squirm—not through vindictiveness, but by way of impairing their dangerous authority in the future.

In Edmund Wilson's "Appeal to Progressives" in a recent number of *The New Republic*, he takes account of these matters, and makes certain suggestions as to what should follow the present debacle. "We have talked about the desirability of a planned society," he writes; "the phrase 'social control' has been our blessed Mesopotamian word. But if this means anything, does it not mean socialism? And should we not do well to make this perfectly plain?" And he concludes:

I believe that if the American radicals and progressives who repudiate the Marxian dogma and the strategy of the Communist party hope to accomplish anything valuable, they must take Communism away from the Communists, and take it without ambiguities or reservations, asserting that their ultimate goal is the ownership of the means of production by the government and an industrial rather than a regional representation.

This, he says, would involve an open confession "that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are due to be supplanted by some new manifesto and some new bill of rights." And such opposition "must dissociate its eco-

nomics completely from what is by this time a purely rhetorical ideal of American democracy."

Thus he advocates: the nationalization of industry; the frank identifying of this program as socialism or as communism; and, as a corollary, the scrapping of the Constitution and the avowed repudiation of American democracy as "a purely rhetorical ideal." While not many of us are sufficiently well placed to be greatly disturbed by this program, I do find two primary objections which might be brought against it. The first I might call an absolute objection—the second an objection on the grounds of expediency.

My absolute objection, like the absolute objection to capitalism in times of prosperity, looks much the weaker. So I shall dispose of it first, as I lay little weight upon it, and fear that it will convince no one. This objection is an objection to flags. The West has been forever plagued by its orgies of enthusiasm, of faith, of evangelizing, of Christian soldiering—aspects all of standard-bearing which I should group under the heading of flags. Occidental history has been the pitting of one drive against another. We must cease to value the inspirational, for it is the easiest thing of which a man is capable. Deprive him of a meal, or bind his arms, or let him see someone driving off with his car, or give him a ticket to a football game—and behold, he is terrifically inspired. Our ideas are but the intellectual backing for the biological convictions of the daisy—we think in the directions in which we feed. And so, having learned by the archives that the world has gone from flag to flag, I wonder whether the difficulty might be attributed to flags in general, and thus might be found in communistic flags as well as capitalist ones.

Essentially, I mean, we must be rescued by attitudes anterior to political or economic policies. Political and economic policies will be but methods of putting these attitudes into effect. And I would ask that the erroneous attitudes now latent in our society be attacked—that the doctrines of inspiration, of faith, of optimism, of evangelism, of energy, of warlike advancement, be undermined to the extent that the imagination of our artists is capable of undermining them. If we could, for instance, but ruin men's interest in unnecessary material acquisitions, from this one change alone vast economic alterations would follow of themselves.

But such a little change is in reality a tremendous change. I am asking that we change human nature. And despite what the behaviorists have taught us about "conditioning," we know that any basic changing of human nature would be at best a long and arduous process. My absolute objection clearly cannot be considered for the present season. It is Utopian, it is impractical, it does not apply. I concede it: by all means, if we are to work with surety, let us not attempt something so Utopian as the reshaping of human nature. We will be strongest if we can change the situation for the better while leaving people's minds exactly as they were. To be immediately effective, we must promote changes which can be put into effect by utilizing the mentality already at hand. We must be realistic, we must be expedient—which brings me to my second objection.

For is it expedient to ask Americans that they adopt a new flag? Is it expedient that we should deliberately go

out of our way to ally an economic program with names which many people fear more strongly than they fear sinister and gloomy vices? Is it expedient to advocate nationalization of industry in a country less given to such notions than any other spot on earth? In Mr. Wilson's "Appeal" he referred to Communism's need of a publicity agent: Yet he knows as well as I that the first act of such a publicity agent would be to name the new program—the Home Policy, to call nationalization of industry "popular participation," to carry on a nation-wide "educational" campaign—denying up and down that the program had anything on God's earth to do with the nationalization of industry—and as for a repudiation of the Constitution, his suggestions in The New Republic have already made it imperative that the publicity agent distribute free framed copies of the Constitution to anyone sending name and address to the Home Policy headquarters. And the slogans, incidentally, would be: "Against all brands of socialism and communism; against nationalization of industry; for the scientific development of popular participation; for the upholding of the Constitution by conservative modernization."

No, Mr. Wilson makes the mistake that radicalism has always made in America. He would transplant Old World notions verbatim, without national adaptation. His position is analogous to the Communists' attack upon religion. In Russia, where people were generally illiterate, the Church was undeniably a major power in upholding the old regime. But in America, where most of our illiterates can read, what is the propaganda value of the Church compared with that of our magazines and newspapers? To attack the Church is to alienate the populace unnecessarily, since the attack arouses much resentment without in any way affecting the main channels of propaganda. The publicity agent you speak of would make no such mistakes. The Home Policy will not, like Foster Before Fish, insist that its advocates be atheists. It will embrace all creeds. It will regret that some of the clergy still remain aloof, but will proclaim the profoundest respect for their sincerity, and will await with confidence the final alliance between clergy and Homism. Indeed, in discussing the steadily growing popularity of Homist doctrines among the clergy, our publicity agent will point out that the movement is spreading from the top downwards and that already the better paid ministers have expressed sympathy.

Zestful antagonism has been the bane of radicals in America. They court resentment. Consider the heroic but ill adapted strategy in Gastonia. America is the country of "boring from within." Our Western progressives know this only too well. If you want to attack the Republican party, become a Republican. Above all, since we have renounced the absolute and are considering the expedient, let us respect the flags. And let us remember that "nationalization of industry," communism and scrapping the Constitution are woefully bad flags in America.

But how, respecting the flags, could we effect the changes Mr. Wilson advocates? A little reading of recent editorials in The New York Times may give us some hints. We may look among its editorials, where so many tactful distinctions have been drawn lately between the horrible un-American indignity of receiving an unemployment stipend from the government and the fine flower of human hauteur that comes of standing in a breadline or

selling apples with a Humility Label in your hat. Note how The Times falls into sudden admiration of Harmless Herbert for his protests against "raids on the Treasury." Read its somewhat non-sequitur applause to the gambling-in-human-misery slogan (non-sequitur, I call it, because I could never understand who would be made miserable, except perhaps our big financiers, by large governmental expenditures). Observe The Times praying that the country be spared an extra session of Congress. And all, so far as I can see, because of one colossal risk: if the difficulties continue, and Congress remains in session, the loosening of the Treasury's purse strings is bound to follow. The policy would be established; it could lead anywhere; but it would lead for certain to an increased tax on large incomes.

This is our cue. Why niggle with all the dangerous flags that are brandished in Mr. Wilson's article? Why not advocate something very close to a single tax on large incomes? Why not advocate a gradual extension of the tax on large incomes as the basic method of raising revenues?

Mark me: I do not say that we can run up the taxes on large incomes in a day. I am merely saying that it is much nearer to American practices than general nationalization of industry. I am saying that it needs no new flag. I am saying that the very elements which put the Sixteenth Amendment into the Constitution are still at hand to back its more thoroughgoing use. And if the principle were but carried far enough, it would be the equivalent of nationalization—the equivalent, but not the word.

I have been astounded that the Sixteenth Amendment was ever passed. I have been still more astounded that the Supreme Court has not found some way of declaring it unconstitutional. Indeed, in the interests of capitalist consistency I should like to point out that the Supreme Court can still do so. It has but to sacrifice the constitutionality of the Eighteenth Amendment. It can uphold the decision of the New Jersey judge, and declare that the method of ratification by state legislature is not the correct procedure when dealing with amendments affecting the curtailment of "rights," and thus the income-tax amendment will be nullified. And there will be such a general to-do over the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment that nobody will pay any attention to the vanishing of the Sixteenth.

Meanwhile, the Sixteenth Amendment is on the statutes. In view of which, we should act as follows:

We must all become Republicans and Democrats, members of Tammany Hall in New York, members of the Vare organization in Philadelphia, shaking hands with the worst of them, frequenting their speakeasies, gambling in their dens, attending their churches, patronizing their brothels. We must join Rotary Clubs; we must play checkers at the Y. M. C. A. We must demand unceasingly the expulsion of Reds. We must be conformity itself. And occasionally, over drinks and a cigar, we must say lightly to our boon companions (training ourselves to forget that we would like to strangle them), we must say lightly, "Why don't the big fellows have to part with a little more of their incomes in times like these?" We would speculate at random as to how much deprivation a man might suffer by receiving only ten millions a year instead of forty—whereupon we should fall to denouncing the Reds rabidly, and end in a swoon of expansionistic de-

light as we pictured America conquering all Europe with a handful of Marines. Such should be our recipe. We should never weaken. And we should never speech-make.

More important still, we must go among the farmers, asking them questions. They will tell us not to plant potatoes at the dark of the moon—or is it the other way round? They will have strong views on the tuberculin test, and we will take our lesson meekly. And we'll attack the Reds, and nationalization of industry, and atheists (though the Constitution, bless us, was written and adopted by atheists)—and we'll slip in a few words about the income tax. The tax on big incomes (smilingly) would never hurt the farmer! In fact, why shouldn't the farmer be protected at the expense of industrialists? And then ask about pests on the apple—for the farmer can tell you some interesting things about pests on the apple, and the sooner our radicals learn to respect the farmer's lore, the sooner the worst is over.

It is in the farm states that we may hope for a haven for our activities, if these activities are properly conducted. Let us abandon this inefficient business of holding out skulls to be cracked in the labor disputes of industrial communities—and let us recognize that *among the farmers, the only surviving American conservatives*, the anti-industrialist movement must be fostered. It is among the farmers that we may hope to see developed the single tax on large incomes—which is to say the single tax on industry—and the principle could thereafter spread among the industrial workers.

But at this point I must qualify. I am not saying that this plan is within easy reach. I am not even saying that it is possible. I am simply pointing out that it marks in no fundamental ways a departure from our flags. For I have long hesitated to recommend it, and I would even now not recommend it, had not Edmund Wilson's "Appeal" recommended out-and-out nationalization. Only if nationalization can be considered seriously do we have reason to consider seriously the equivalent of nationalization through large income taxes.

As for rebuttal: If this principle were carried into effect with any thoroughness, would it not be true that we should destroy the basic props of American industry? Would not the vast funds flowing into the national treasury eventually require some form of redistribution among the people—and would not such redistribution amount in the end to the giving of doles even where doles were not needed? In giving doles where they are needed, do we necessarily put a premium upon idleness?

I do not know. I can only say that I devoutly hope so. As for our destroying the basic props of American industry, American industry has given us little cause to feel tender about its collapse, if we can but be sure that the collapse does not bring down the vast populace with it as it is now doing. Perhaps a few "basic props" of American industry might be destroyed for the good of all. For if man backs mechanical efficiency with our present philosophy of work and earning, for instance, he is headed for an endless succession of "saturation points." The philosophy of work and earnings that underlies American industry goes best with a paucity and inefficiency of tools, but a philosophy of leisure is all that can spare this wealth-glutted, poverty-stricken system.

We might even advocate that the dole be made the norm. Those who were sufficiently unhappy or uncultured to desire working their heads off by running around an economic circle should be permitted to do so, and at a profit—but such an insult to the Creator should not be a terrifying necessity, as it is today. Leisure is a norm in South Sea climates (or was before our bankers saddled the natives with public debts), and perhaps leisure will have to become a norm in the new climate made by machinery. Perhaps leisure is not merely a privilege of our society—perhaps it has become an economic necessity. And the only way that the present ugly phase of leisure: namely, unemployment, can be converted into the cultured phase of unemployment: namely, leisure, is by the turning over of industry's excess profits to the idle members of society (whether they are idle through inclination or necessity does not matter).

Yet we are getting dangerously near the absolute with which we began. And we do so in this wise: we saluted generous congressional appropriations as sufficient for the moment (happy to think that we can base so much upon the recommendations of the Ninety Prominent Economists to the President). We assumed that such congressional appropriations would sooner or later involve the increase of taxation on large incomes. We then asked that all radicals join the major parties and appeal within the party for further extensions of the income-tax principle until carried to a point where it served as a means of gradual nationalization. We conceded what seems to be a fear of *The Times*, that the principle of the dole could easily be extended until it became a menace to present business efficiency—since much of the drive behind capitalism at present, so far as the lowest kinds of employment go, is undoubtedly fostered by the terror of joblessness. But we welcomed the destruction of industrialist hegemony and industrialist thinking. And this brings us back to a "philosophy," back to advocating a certain attitude which is prior to economics or policies. So, while recommending the expedient doctrine of nationalization through increased taxation of big incomes, we find that we must still invest, for the "long pull," in the absolute doctrine of flaglessness, lack of driving ambition, loss of interest in a powerful advance towards nowhere.

Flags may still be needed to combat flags, but the triumph of the last flag should coincide with the triumph of flaglessness. If there is ever a millennium, it will be the reign of doubt. If the future is to be made livable, it will be made livable by our questioning everything but the certainties of the body itself, the dogmas of animal functioning. Our thinking must not be, as it now is, a simple reënförment of such instincts of self-preservation and aggrandizement as we acquired in the jungle. Above brute faith, upon native inspiration, upon love of conformity, we must erect indolence, sloth, the idle curiosity which appears at its best in the skepticism and inquiries of pure science.

So, behind the immediate haggles of politics and economics, lies the artist's business of undermining the cannibalistic beliefs which are ruining our civilization. Beneath a seasonal economic ill lies a basic cultural ill, a mistake in human aspirations, a bad ideological adjustment to the situation in which we happen to be placed—and art

can do no greater service to society than by causing the disintegration of such attitudes, by making propaganda difficult, by fostering intellectual distrust. We must de-occidentalize the West. We must promote such attitudes as cancel the tremendous powers we have accumulated. Certainties may be used as expedients, if they are expediently applied—but the theoretical end must be the renunciation of all certainty. For we can depend upon it that even a world rigorously schooled in doubt would still be dogmatical enough.

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