

Editorial I:

Apathy: A Reappraisal

From the *New York Times* I see that somewhere on the eastern seaboard recently there gathered a group of America's most illustrious intellectuals to hand down their prophesies on what America will be like for the next few years. I do not recall the names of these worthies, but I do recall that they were in solemn accord as to our immediate situation. After running their hands over the bumps and ridges of what they consider to be the nation's skull they all agreed that we are in for a period of woe, variously described as apathy, moral lassitude, torpor, and so forth — grim tidings for us all. The bad news swept into the editorial offices of the *New York Times* like a blight. Everyone put their finger-paints away, held hands, and trembled. Calamity was upon the New York publishing tycoons. The Bernsteins might never throw another cocktail party ever again. Apathy, that infamous crippler of Good Causes, had come out of the hell holes of Dubuque to suffuse the Republic and swat the New Age in its prime. The Rotary triumphs!

So the career moralists, the wowers of Aquarius, Radical Chic, and all the other daft relicts of Puritanism are going to take to the bread lines. So what? Let the penthouses revolutionaries moan as they will, I consider the revival of apathy a stupendous blessing. Apathy reigns at the top of my chart of preferred values and democratic virtues. When I heard the sweet news of its resurrection, my bartender's business doubled, and I laid in a copious supply of cheap champagne. Apathy will make the country grow. Good riddance to the nuisances.

There are acres of good things that can be said about apathy. For one, it seems to annoy all the right people. Anything that ages the New Left, or whatever it calls itself these days, deserves a good word and encores. But apathy, to be admired in its fullness, must be percipiently grasped, so we must understand what exactly the wowers fear America has become apathetic about. Have Americans become apathetic about a more lush Gross National Product? Are Americans indifferent to good cheer, beautiful women, butterflies, serenity, and fresh fruit? Not at all. That which has driven the Brothers Berrigan to their frozen chambers and has induced Jason Epstein to go into the tin pan business is nothing other than the appalling realization that a prodigious majority of Americans no longer shares their enthusiasms, their enthusiams for gloom, uplift, and crash experiments at the expense of the other fellow's comfort. It means that Americans have tired of their blowzy acts of charlatanry and are turning to old movies and football. It means all of us are not going to goose-step together and that Pius George is not going to lead us out of Vietnam and into the fire. Simply stated it means that Americans are indifferent to the much heralded New Age; precisely stated it means much more. For the exegesis of

apathy in the particular context in which it is used today, we must trudge off to the OED and to Kenneth Minogue, the wise and apathetic political theorist.

To be apathetic is to be insensitive to suffering, says the OED. And according to Mr. Minogue the crowd over at *The New York Review of Books* suffers quite a lot over just about everything. The reincarnated Puritan is possessed of a standardized sensibility leaving him dissatisfied with the world because it contains suffering—a sad situation if ever there was one. He is possessed of this standardized sensibility because he sees politics as a technique for pursuing long term social objectives. His fondest aspiration, his life ambition, is to arrange society so as to ensure a certain moral behavior. When politics is apprehended in this way, that is to say as a technical activity, one must adhere to some sort of standardized sensibility embracing all of society. The result of this abstruse process is that our mod Puritan decides what he requires of society, and organizes society in such a way as to realize his objectives. Thus, Puritan Chic politicizes life right down to its most private intimacies. When that awesome group of prophets got together and revealed that America was in for a debauch of apathy, they meant that Americans are indifferent to about everything that matters to them. Americans are indifferent to one of the most comprehensive spooneries of all time: the notion of standardized suffering. Puritan Chic believes that suffering is everywhere and so Americans must be indifferent to everything.

Well ta, ta. As I see it that does not make America quite the ghastly place that Puritan Chic would make it out to be. I do not see Americans as particularly indifferent to suffering. I see Americans as indifferent to moral totalitarians. I see Americans as insensitive to the wowers, to all their dizzying plans for rearranging society, and to using politics as a yoke on free men.

Understood in this way, then, apathy is a very good portent. Apathy is a rejection of the comprehensive view of politics held by the busybodies who have been burning to launch us into new priorities and the glories of "fundamental change." Apathy means that Americans sniff at the New Age.

And this was deliciously proved in the recent shouting match. The citizenry did not give Mr. Nixon an overwhelming mandate, they gave Pius George a bop on the snoot. The polls never showed Mr. Nixon as a popular messiah until he was paired with the candidate of Puritan Chic. Then he came off looking like the new Roosevelt, but in other races the plain folk of the Republic pulled about the same levers they always pull. If this be apathy, I prefer it to the oily, all-embracing rhetoric of the New Age. Indeed we need more of it.

Commitment and high purpose is what

got us into Vietnam. It is what sustained the national draft. It is what has turned vast reaches of our urban paradises into franchized slums, abounding with boodle for the visionaries of city hall and misery for the poor. The national epidemic of idealism that recently reran its course through the universities left many of them on the brink of well deserved bankruptcies. Most of the great universities of the land are now practically indistinguishable from insane asylums and what passes for learning in the lesser institutions could better be carried on in mud puddles.

I can hardly think of a period in American history when a large dose of apathy would not have served the commonweal handsomely. Would we have suffered the absurdity of Prohibition if the majority of Americans had merely snickered at the idealistic whoops of the WCTU? Would the Bill of Rights have been defiled and anti-communism have fallen upon such hard times if Senator McCarthy had been accorded snores? What is more, would the nation have been afflicted by such windy frauds as Huey Long, Henry Wallace, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Gloria Steinem, William Kunstler, Norman Mailer, vitamin C and patent medicines, organic foods and cybernetics, if the soporific winds of apathy had caressed the land?

Now of course I do not celebrate or enjoin a national commitment to apathy. That would be illogical and imprudent. If we all snoozed continuously the men of enthusiasms would have an easy time of it, and in no time we would be strapped with their latest obsession. But what I do say is that apathy deserves a reappraisal and an intelligent appreciation. It has its place in a robust democracy, and I think old James Madison had it in mind when he penned Federalist Fifty-One. Certain once fashionable frauds now talk about it as though it were a prelude to the Dark Ages. It is nothing of the sort. It is...ah Mr. McGovern, it is the fresh wind of change.

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

Editorial II:

Why I Voted for Richard M. Nixon

The choicest qualities which recommended Richard Nixon for another term were: his utter prosaism, his lack of any imaginable kind of glamour, and his inability to excite the faintest quiver of enthusiasm. An odd confection of ingredients you might say, but for me they rendered President Nixon irresistible. I take it as a sign of divine intervention that Richard Nixon is such a deeply uninspiring leader. In performing before the cameras, he is awkward and unconvincing. His press conferences have all the easy atmosphere of a public execution. He is vulnerable to almost any one of those cunningly triggered questions the newsmen lay for him; his wooden humor makes dogs howl, and even small

children wince. Through all these years, no one has ever been able to put Mr. Nixon over on the press, the intellectuals, or the priggish hordes of suburban and university intellectualoids whose yearnings seem to be for the benign despotisms of the past. Stylistically Mr. Nixon is yuk.

But then so is the chief executive of almost any large corporation, and the gloomy fact is that our Republic has become the largest corporation of all. It needs a competent executive. If he flunks his screen tests, so what? Mr. James Roach, the recently retired chief executive of General Motors, always made excruciatingly painful performances on television. But reasonable and knowledgeable persons do not expect corporation executives to answer questions gracefully or to make women swoon. It is more important that executives ask questions, the right questions, and pound tables if these questions are not answered. Mr. Nixon is competent at asking questions and pounding tables. He is the most competent executive available.

Now if America were a religion, Mr. McGovern would have had my vote. He is capable of moralizing under the most unusual circumstances, and he has convinced me that he worries about my spiritual well-being. I have become acquainted with his homilies, and they, in their quaintness, do not make me feel threatened. But Mr. McGovern as steward of a democratic republic is quite un-

thinkable. He is indistinguishable from the soapbox orators who used to unbosom themselves in Chicago's Bug House Square. His politics drift off towards the crackpot and the bizarre, leaving me to contemplate Mr. Nixon's policies.

The President has expeditiously moved to assure peace on a wider range than was ever anticipated. His concern for human travail seems genuine and only rarely is his realism about human possibilities vitiated by the kind of megalomania that drives governments to undertake the impossible. But most importantly he has proved his competence by directing the corporation through one of the most perilous periods in its history. He did it without whooping it up and disturbing the cows. He seems willing to leave us to our humors. If in the next four years he can trim down the corporation's overhead, fire the handful of petty fixers beneath him, and close down some of the inappropriate and unprofitable divisions, he may be judged one of the great executives of the century. But Americans must swear off the meretricious charms of glamour and religious quackery. They are all too dizzying and dangerous to democratic polity. Even moderate doses of the stuff bring on totalitarian hangovers.

George Nathan



Movements and Critics

Intellectuals are deservedly famous for being steadfast advocates of progressive ideals. What is less widely acknowledged is that they are also the most volatile and reactionary element in modern political society. This is so for the obvious but often neglected reason that the usual vehicle for the intellectual's pursuit of his progressive ideology is not the party or the interest group, but the oppositional political movement.

Intellectuals' politics are volatile because movements are volatile. A movement is characterized by the absence of structure, formal leadership, or settled goals, and this makes it inherently subject to rapid shifts and changes, especially in a radical direction. It is also in the nature of movements to be, or become, reactionary. A movement is not a movement, after all, unless its adherents exhibit ideological uniformity. The effort to create and sustain such uniformity inevitably makes members of movements hostile to freedom, diversity, and civility.

Moreover, as movements adopt ever more extreme positions, this same insistence on conformity forces them into an ever more resolute denial of reason, intellectual honesty, and humane values. To be sure, every movement worth its salt will be found marching under the banner of progressive goals and speaking the rhetoric of social justice. These goals and that rhetoric are a reality. But a second and coequal reality is that, regardless of its goals, a movement is a movement, and as such possesses an animus against freedom, diversity, civility, reason, honesty, and maturity. Such an animus is the very definition of political reaction.

Periodically, the modern world has been disrupted by movements of this paradoxical variety, and the intellectual community has usually enlisted itself enthusiastically for the duration, with all the predictable, disastrous results for standards of discourse for the intellectual life of the whole. But alongside this pat-

tern, a second, countervailing tendency is also discernable. For whenever movements have flourished, so too have small but influential countermovements, made up of intellectuals who have chosen to resist the *zeitgeist* and who oppose the most reactionary excesses. In doing so, these resisters, whom Peter Steinfels has termed the "counter intellectuals," have seldom made themselves popular. But they have undeniably leaned against the winds of fashionable reaction; they have made their voices heard; and in the process they have produced some of the most brilliant social criticism and many of the most luminous and enduring defenses of humane values to be found in western literature. Thus, the dialectic of movements and their critics.

At any given point in time, the battle between a movement and its critics seems absurdly one-sided. In a movement's nascency, as its ethos is forged and its first leaders appear, the movement is vastly outnumbered, and its voices are drowned out by a critical chorus of dismissal and derision. Later on, when a movement begins to flourish and approaches the peak of its influence, it is usually the critics who are hopelessly in the minority, at least in the intellectual community, and it is not without reason that they often feel themselves to be voices crying in the wilderness. They discover that their writings, when not disregarded altogether, are received as ill-tempered, ill-informed, simplistic potboilers reflecting only irrational hostility, and unaccountable perversity or some kind of self-interest. Later still, however, after the movement has died out or been destroyed (usually by its own excesses rather than through the power of its critics), it is again the critics who prevail. Their books are widely read and sighted as models of humane clarity, and their lives are admired for their qualities of courage and prescience, and the once-popular leaders and doctrines of the movement against which they tilted are dismissed without a thought.

This dialectic between movements and critics also has a substantive aspect. In their early stages, movements tend to be reformist in character: they identify specific problems and injustices and press for specific redress. At this stage, the critic tends to adopt the somewhat philistine stance of pooh-pooing the notion that there is a serious problem or that anything should be done about it. The movement sometimes then begins to grow. More and more people begin to enlist their sympathy in support of the reformist definition of the problem—and in reaction against the early critics' insensitivity to it. At the same time, however, the leaders of the movement become more extreme, and the definition of the problem becomes ever more sweeping. From having been a specific problem with a specific solution, it becomes a problem inherent in the socio-political system that can be solved only by revolution—and from there it may be further redefined as a problem inherent in life as we know it, so that the solution is nothing less than a recreation of man

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