

# The Forum

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## AMERICA'S YOUNG RADICALS

By GEORGE SANTAYANA

**W**HEN I was a college professor, I sometimes wondered why there was no socialism among the sophomores. Now that I am not there to welcome it, the thing seems to have come.

I say *to welcome it*, because although I am a high Tory in my sympathies, I recognize that different hearts must be set on different things, and I like young people who have hearts, and who set them on something. It is a great pity if, for lack of self-knowledge or a congenial environment, they set them on the wrong thing, and miss their possible happiness, or miss even the noble martyrdom of knowing why they are unhappy. But they will not have set their hearts on the wrong thing simply because that thing may be indifferent or disagreeable to *me*. My personal feelings have nothing to do with the genuineness of their ideals, or with the worth of their happiness, if they are able to attain it. At most, my experience may make me suspect that these ideals may be unattainable, or that in choosing them these young men, in some cases, may have misunderstood their own nature, and may be pursuing something which, if they

got it, would make them very sick. When that is so, a word of warning from an outsider may not be entirely useless.

The reason why it is easy to mistake the demands of one's own nature is that human instincts are very complex and confused, and that they mature at different times, or are suppressed or disguised altogether; whereas the fancy is peopled only by the shallow images of such things as we happen to have come upon in our experience. We cannot love, nor warmly imagine, what we have never seen; even when we hate things as we find them (as every fresh soul must in a great measure) our capacity to conceive better things is limited to such hints as actual things have vouchsafed us. We may therefore have no idea at all of what would really satisfy us; even if it were described to us in words, we should not recognize it as our ideal of happiness. It would seem cold, exotic, irrelevant, because nothing of that sort had as yet entered our experience, or lay in the path immediately open before us.

I was accordingly not at all surprised that the life of the ancients, although alone truly human and addressed to a possible happiness, should not appeal to young America. It is too remote, too simple; it presupposes the absence of this vast modern mechanical momentum, this rushing tide of instrumentalities on which young America is borne along so merrily. What surprised me a little was that everybody seemed content to go on swimming and swimming: for even when a man grumbled and worried about his difficulties or mishaps—athletic training, college clubs, family friction, dubious prospects, unrequited love—he yet seemed to be entirely at peace with the general plan of existence as he found it; not at all oppressed by the sense of any surrounding ugliness, vulgarity, vanity, servitude, or emptiness. Was there in these youths, I used to ask myself, so engaging often in their personal ardor, no human soul at all, but rather the soul of some working ant or unquestioning bee, eager to run on its predetermined errands, store its

traditional honey, and build its geometrical cell, for the queen of the hive, the future Mrs. Ant or Mrs. Bee, to lay her eggs in? I am far from regarding romantic man as necessarily the best of animals, or a success at all, so far; and I am quite willing he should be superseded, if nature, in America or elsewhere, can evolve a superior species to take his place; but this sudden extinction of human passion seemed a little strange, and I doubted whether perfect happiness in mechanism was as yet possible even for the healthiest, busiest, most athletic, most domestic, and most conventional American. Might not the great American panacea for human wretchedness, Work, be not so much a cure as an anaesthetic?

And now, apparently, the awakening has come, at least to a few, and the sophomores (who are many of them out of college) have discovered the necessity of socialism. I call it socialism for short, although they are not all advocates of socialism in a technical sense, but style themselves liberals, radicals, or (modestly) the *Intelligentsia*. The point is that they all proclaim their disgust at the present state of things in America, they denounce the Constitution of the United States, the churches, the government, the colleges, the press, the theatres, and above all they denounce the spirit that vivifies and unifies all these things, the spirit of Business. Here is disaffection breaking out in which seemed the most unanimous, the most satisfied of nations: here are Americans impatient with America.

Is it simply impatience? Is it the measles, and by the time these sophomores are reverend seniors will it have passed away? Or is it a tragic atavism in individuals, such as must appear sporadically in all ages and nations, an inopportune sport of nature, hatching a bird of paradise in the arctic regions? Even in this case, pathetic as it is, nothing can be done except to wait for the unhappy creatures to come to a fluttering end, for lack of sunshine and appropriate worms. Untoward genius must die in a corner. I am ready to believe that these young radicals are geniuses

and birds of paradise, as they evidently feel themselves to be; if so, their complaints ought to make a beautiful elegy; but it would still be a dying song. Or is it possible, on the contrary, that they are prophets of something attainable, boy-scouts with a real army behind them, and a definite future?

I have made a severe effort to discover, as well as I may from a distance, what these rebels want. I see what they are *against*—they are against everything—but what are they *for*? I have not been able to discover it. This may be due to my lack of understanding or to their incapacity to express themselves clearly, for their style is something appalling. But perhaps their scandalous failure in expression, when expression is what they yearn for and demand at all costs, may be a symptom of something deeper: of a radical mistake they have made in the direction of their efforts and aspirations. They think they need more freedom, more room, a chance to be more spontaneous: I suspect that they have had too much freedom, too much empty space, too much practice in being spontaneous when there was nothing in them to bubble out. Their style is a sign of this: it is not merely that they have no mastery of the English language as hitherto spoken, no clear sense of the value of words, and no simplicity; that they are without the vocabulary or the idiom of cultivated people.

That might all be healthy evolution, even if a little disconcerting to us old fogies, who can't keep up with the progress of slang. America has a right to a language of its own, and to the largest share in forming that pigeon-English which is to be the "world-language" of the future. But it is not comparatively only that the style of the young radicals is bad, nor in view of traditional standards: it is bad intrinsically; it is muddy, abstract, cumbrous, contorted, joyless, obscure. If their thoughts were clear, if the images in their minds were definite and fondly cherished, if their principles and allegiances were firm, we should soon learn to read their language and feel it to be pure and

limpid, however novel its forms. Dante wrote in a new dialect, provincial and popular; yet how all his words shine like dew on a sunny morning! But Dante had looked long and intently; he had loved silently; he knew what he felt and what he believed. No: it is not more freedom that young America needs in order to be happy: it needs more discipline.

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### TO THE LITTLE MASTERS

By MARGUERITE WILKINSON

You little masters of the world,  
Whose words are subtle stings,  
Build up your walls before our feet,  
Your ceilings for our wings,

Saying, "You may not climb too far  
Nor lift your flight too high  
Above our drab and decent ways  
Where all the world goes by."

But we have seen the morning shine  
And heard the mountains call,  
Though sevenfold strong the prison be  
The sevenfold strength shall fall.

A million saints with flashing feet  
Have climbed beyond your sight;  
A million singers lifted song  
On wings of silver light.

As it has been, so it shall be  
While scorn may claim her own;  
By all the laughter of the years  
You shall be overthrown.

Our feet shall pass beyond your door;  
The clashing of our wings  
Shall blind you, masters of the world—  
Your words are little things.