

# THE AMERICAN SCENE

ACCORDING to Dr. Henry F. Helmholtz, President of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the birth rate at present 'is the lowest in the history of our country.' This shrinkage in population has been especially severe since 1930, so that by the end of 1940 the decennial increase will probably have been the lowest since 1850-1860. Instead of an estimated additional 13,000,000 of population, there will be only an additional 8,500,000. At present nearly 60 per cent of American families have no children whatever, while only 10 per cent have more than two children. The death rate, it is true, has declined to 11 per thousand, or 6 per thousand below the birth rate. In time, however, it is bound to meet the birth rate, for a large number of older people will soon begin to die.

Meanwhile, the ordinary processes of business enterprise have been thrown out of kilter. Since 1928, the top year in infant population, the production of all children's goods—baby carriages, toys, wearables, and medical supplies—has gone down sharply, and so has the production of all such auxiliary goods as school buildings, furniture, and books. The heavy industries behind these goods have naturally also suffered, and their decline has not been counterbalanced by the needs of the larger number of oldsters, whose demands diminish with the years.

In a decade or two, when the death rate among mature men and women will increase and even the declining birth rate will over-reach the lag in

infants' industries, there will have to be a readjustment, and industry will enjoy another boom—for how long no one can say. One factor may throw all this reasoning completely out. During the past two years it has become smart to have children. Movie stars are raising families, and what movie stars do, ordinary folk, in the long run, will also do. How long this new phenomenon will operate, it is difficult to say. One thing seems certain, however. The aforementioned phenomenon cannot last long unless the cost of childbirth is drastically reduced. Few couples can afford the apparent minimum of \$500 it takes to bring a baby into the world. Perhaps the coöperative medicine movement will get around to doing something about this.

AT THE last convention of the American Bar Association, held in San Francisco, a New York attorney urged the establishment in all large urban centers of Hyde Parks, where almost anybody could get up—as in the London Hyde Park—and say pretty nearly anything. Something like this has already been established in Mayor Hague's Jersey City, thanks to the denunciation of him by the United States Supreme Court. One hopes that many other cities will follow suit. Nothing could be more democratic, and nothing could do more good. The desire to gabble freely seems to be almost as powerful as an instinct, but few people ever get the chance to exercise it. Only a handful

have enough money to set up newspapers, and not many more get the opportunity to speak over the radio. So they are forced to wrangle with their wives and friends—or to join secret societies.

In a place set aside for public gabbing, every man and woman could talk to his heart's content—and be applauded or ridiculed. Most stupid and vicious ideas are instantly recognized by the common man once they are presented without the trappings of secrecy and once he is given the right to answer back. As Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes said in 1920 in his argument opposing the expulsion of Socialist Assemblymen from the New York Legislature: 'Hyde Park meetings and soap box oratory constitute the most efficient safety valve against resort by the discontented to physical force.'

EARLY next fall the Temporary National Economic (Monopoly) Committee will conduct the most intensive hearings on insurance in the history of the nation. The newspapers will probably give these hearings as little space as they gave the initial hearings which ended only the other day. But one cannot insist too strongly on their importance. A preliminary report of the Committee—which the daily press mentioned but cursorily—says:—

'Legal reserve life insurance companies have absorbed more and more of the country's savings. In 1937 the assets of these companies exceeded by almost \$10,000,000,000 the combined assets of savings bank and loan associations in this country, and are far greater than the savings deposits in state and national commercial banks. In fact, while the population has

doubled since 1890, life insurance assets have been multiplied twenty-five times. So great have the assets become that industry and government discover themselves increasingly dependent upon life insurance companies for essential financing. To illustrate, as of December 31, 1938, the forty-nine largest legal reserve life insurance companies owned 11 per cent of the direct and guaranteed debt of the United States Government; 9.9 per cent of all state, city, municipal, and political subdivisional debt; 22.9 per cent of all railroad bonds; 22 per cent of the entire public utility debt; 15 per cent of the industrial debt; 11 per cent of all farm mortgages; and 14 per cent of all city mortgages.'

The insurance magazines have been full of articles and editorials about the Monopoly Committee, stating more or less openly that the companies had better mend their ways if they wanted their business—the largest in the country—to escape complete nationalization. Yet the newspapers and even the liberal periodicals have largely ignored the entire matter.

THE death of J. E. Spingarn removes from the contemporary American scene one of the two literary critics of enduring size. Though he had not practiced criticism for more than a decade, his influence was deeply felt, and no doubt will continue to be felt for a long, long time. Next to Van Wyck Brooks he did more than anybody else to give life to an art which, until his day, could boast of no one worthy of much serious attention. He was a rare phenomenon in American criticism, where so many pass judgment and so few know whereof they speak, or can write tolerable English.

He possessed a large fund of information about world literature, he had a fine feeling for the literary impulse and could spot a fraud several miles away, and he wrote vigorously. With no moral, religious, racial, or economic axe to grind, he hunted out those with genuine talent and placed them in the historical scheme of things. Perhaps he saw more in Croce than there actually was, but what moved him in the Italian philosopher was something true and good and beautiful. He never succumbed to the plague of smartness or to the more virulent plague of boastful ignorance. He wrote out of the integrity of his own soul and the plenitude of his learning, and always had something illuminating to say. Honest men and women in the literary world will miss him.

A SURVEY by the American Institute of Public Opinion reveals that four out of ten voters don't know how to define a liberal or radical, while the other six give definitions that vary greatly. This need surprise no one, for strange developments have taken place. Some men and women who call themselves liberals and radicals have become such vociferous jingoes that they make the late Senator Henry Cabot Lodge look like a dove of peace in retrospect.

If the kindly Eugene V. Debs were alive today, he would probably find himself ridiculed by a large element among the Communists and liberals as a rank isolationist, a softy, an other-worldly fanatic. They would especially find fault with his argument that British and French 'democracy' is not worth one American soldier's life, and that America could best serve humanity by minding her own busi-

ness. On the other hand, he would be pleasantly surprised by the attitude of such an organ as the *Saturday Evening Post*, which, at least in part, advocates a foreign policy not much different from the one he advocated in 1917, namely, to hell with Europe and its conflicting banditries.

In the liberal-radical world, careful men and women find it more and more difficult to hold on to their integrity and keep all their old friends at the same time.

THE closing of the Federal Theatre Project has revived discussion of a Federally supported series of art enterprises, not only in the drama, but in music, painting and the dance. Even so conservative a commentator as Mark Sullivan has looked favorably upon this idea, calling it 'a reasonable and practicable suggestion,' and citing the salubrious experiences of the European countries in this connection.

The amount of money to be spent on such projects would be far less than the Government spends every year in doles—never repaid—to business. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation, according to its latest report, stands to lose about \$10,000,000 in 'bad loans.' For one-tenth this amount of money, the Government could put on about 50 good dramatic productions, giving employment to thousands of people, and pleasure to millions. The Federal Theatre shows did so well financially that the chances are that the \$1,000,000 thus invested would, in the long run, earn a handsome return. And what would be true of a Federally subsidized theatre would be even more true of Federally subsidized orchestras, dancing groups, and painting.

guilds, for they cost far less and involve smaller risks.

VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON'S three-volume *Main Currents in American Thought* has been reissued in one volume. One hopes for it a large sale, especially in universities and colleges, where American history and literature, on the whole, still suffer the ignominy of very few courses and the poorest professors. More than anybody else in our time Dr. Parrington added size and dignity to the study of our own institutions and culture. His books, especially those dealing with the years 1620-1860, brought together critically all the varied riches of our intellectual and artistic life, placing them properly in world history. Never again will provincial professors at Harvard, or Wooster, or Colgate or Pennsylvania State find it smart to belittle our own annals as compared to those of Holland or Belgium or England. Dr. Parrington made such condescension forever after ridiculous.

Unfortunately his excursions in the realm of literary criticism left much to be desired. He inclined to take the traditional judgments for granted, and in his last volume, dealing with recent times, he didn't seem to be able to make up his mind as to the positions of Sinclair Lewis, Dreiser, O'Neill, and Hemingway. The purely literary impulse baffled him, and evaluating it sent him into strange enthusiasms and condemnations, though he looked in the right direction for the stuff that makes for literature, never succumbing to the academic snobbishness of ignoring contemporaries. An apostle

of democracy, he practiced it in his critical and historical writings, often with great success, always with the highest scholarly integrity. His death ten years ago deprived the country of its only major cultural historian.

THE financial pages of the *New York Times* recently gave much space to the suggestion of a New Yorker, Dr. G. A. Dommissé, made in his book, *The Regulation of Retail Trade Competition—An Economic Approach*, to the effect that prospective retail merchants hereafter be made to go through a compulsory examination 'in order to prevent incompetent people from committing economic suicide by engaging in a vocation for which they are unfit.'

The good doctor must have been fooling. Isn't it the inalienable right of every American to commit economic suicide in any way he chooses without interference from the government or any of its Fascist-Communist bureaus? Besides, isn't sheer luck an important ingredient of nearly every retail business—and how can one be examined for one's susceptibility to good fortune? What rational person would have seen any sense in the first suggestion made in American history that free, literate men and women would stop on their way to work or to lunch for a five-cent drink of phony orange juice or even phonier cocoanut juice? Yet that preposterous notion is behind an enterprise doing millions of dollars worth of business every year. Dr. Dommissé's suggestion would therefore seem to be grossly un-American. But, of course, he must have meant it as a joke.

—C. A.

# NOTES AND COMMENTS

## Quips from Italy

Two Italians meet on the street.

'How are you?'

'Thanks, better.'

'???'

'Better than next year, of course.'

—*Ordre*, Paris

It is well-known that Mussolini is fond of arranging contests among his Ministers. Recently he arranged one in which the stupidest Minister was to win. Who won? Achille Starace. Why? He said that Alfieri was intelligent.

An Italian who heard this joke was indignant, and said:—

'How can you talk about Starace in this manner? Don't you know that he was a child prodigy?'

'No, really?'

'Certainly. When he was three, he was as intelligent as he is today.'

—*Cri de Paris*

A few weeks ago, the drinking of coffee became an offense in Italy. People asked, 'Why has coffee been prohibited?' The answer is: 'So the Italians won't wake up.'

—*Cyrano*, Paris

A foreigner asked for butter at a restaurant. When he tried it, he pulled a face, and exclaimed: 'Now I know why you prefer can-nons!'

—*Pariser Tageszeitung*

This is one of the more bitter Roman pasquinades that are again coming into vogue.

'Invaded by Germans, isolated from the rest of the world, exhausted by armaments race, we are in a dreadful situation. There is only one person in the world who can save us: Mussolini's widow.'

—*Europe Nouvelle*, Paris

Latest Italian *bon mot*: If we had half as much to eat, as we have to swallow, we would lead a marvellous life.

—*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*

## Behind the Times

At a hearing in a criminal court in Czeszochowa, Poland, a young boy in the dock was being tested as to his mental powers. The magistrate said to him: 'How many States are there in Europe?' The boy's counsel got up and, turning to the magistrate, said: 'Sir, my client hasn't yet had time to read the morning papers and can't, therefore, give a reliable reply.'

—*Japan Chronicle*, Kobe

## The Best Cure

There are many alleged cures for sea-sickness. It has been left to a refugee from Germany to discover the panacea for homesickness.

Recently the purser of a British liner had to visit the cabin of a refugee. On the table was a photograph of Herr Hitler.

'Gosh,' said the purser. 'What are you, a refugee, doing with the Führer's portrait?'

'Ah,' said the refugee, 'it's a wrench to leave one's home. I keep that picture as an antidote to homesickness.'

—*The Evening Standard*, London

## Proud Possessors

Two Czechs were strolling one evening in the streets of Prague discussing current events.

After furtively glancing around to insure not being overheard, the one said to his companion: 'Who would have thought twelve months ago that Memel would belong to us?'

—*The Financial Times*, London

## Explosive Soldier

During the war in Spain a young soldier was brought back from the front suffering from a wound in the shoulder. Cheerfully, the victim declared that no one had ever received a wound quite like his own, and when the doctors questioned him, he declared that he had in his shoulder a shell from a two-inch quick-firer, and that it had not yet exploded.

The doctors examined the wound, and probed the shoulder. Suddenly they felt the projectile taking shape under their fingers, and found that it seemed, indeed, intact and still loaded with its fuse.