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Earl Black

MENCKEN AND INDIVIDUALISM

THOUGH HISTORIANS have begun to redress the balance, the popular conception of the Twenties in America remains that of an era unparalleled in superficiality, an essentially frivolous decade characterized by Prohibition, Red-scares, anti-evolution statutes and a concerted effort to return to a style of life that Harding christened "normalcy." No critic contributed more through his writings to the creation of an image of America as a fundamentally vapid, jejune civilization than H. L. Mencken, the Baltimore sage who developed a prose style yet unmatched for color and vividness of metaphor in American journalism and who devoted his undisputed polemical abilities largely to tabulating and excoriating the antics of what he called *Boobus americanus*.

Curiously, interest in Mencken, as evidenced by the republication sale of a sizable portion of his work and by numerous articles about him, has increased wonderously as of late. I think an explanation for his present popularity lies in his conception of individualism, a conception which has a psychological appeal for a generation to whom the luxury of unadulterated negativeness as a style of life is denied. Analysis of Menckonian individualism affords some insight into the profound differences which separate the tone of political life of the Twenties from that of the Sixties.

Although Mencken generally avoided the terms "individualism" and "individualist," his theory of individualism is implicit in his conscious and crude division of men into two mutually exclusive classes: the elite or "civilized minority," and the preponderant majority of Americans, a group which constitutes "the most timorous, sniveling, poltroonish, ignominious mob of serfs and goose-steppers ever gathered under one flag in Christendom since the end of the Middle Ages."¹ Only the former, the elite, are biologically capable of independent thought and action. They alone possess reasoning power and creative ability. All other Americans are motivated exclusively by envy and hatred of their betters, and, unable to express themselves authentically,

unwilling to defer socially to their betters, and unable even to appreciate the achievements of their moral and intellectual superiors, the mob relieves its gnawing sense of inferiority by suppressing that which it cannot comprehend. Such, in brief, is Mencken's understanding of the nature of man. "Men are not alike," he argued, "and very little can be learned about the mental processes of a congressman, an ice-wagon driver or a cinema actor by studying the mental processes of a genuinely superior man."² Only the "genuinely superior" have individuality.

Mencken's published work spanned six decades, but my concern here is with the ideas Mencken expressed in the Twenties, the period in which he, as editor of *The American Mercury*, reached the zenith of his prestige and influence. His conception of individualism may be best understood in comparative terms. There are at least two alternative interpretations of Menckonian individualism, neither of which, in my view, yields a concept approaching the maturity and profundity of Tocqueville's original description of individualism as that ". . . mature and calm feeling which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends . . . [and thus leave] society at large to itself."³ For Tocqueville individualism is a sociological phenomenon which results from a general equality of social conditions and which carries no normative connotation. The image of the Tocquevillian individualist is that of a man who suffers myopia. This citizen clearly perceives only his immediate personal interests; social goals and needs are but blurs in his vision. Tocqueville employs individualism as a conceptual tool to grapple with the difficulties of restructuring an atomistic culture liberated from the rigidity of European class society, but Menckonian individualism struggles with no task more socially significant or arduous than delineating the stance of the "genuinely superior" man toward society and is almost Emersonian in its rejection of indigenous cultural values. Mencken, Emerson, and Thoreau would presumably agree that the values of their respective societies were untenable, for to them individualism consisted largely of asserting oneself against received social standards. However, where Thoreau made his protest concrete by physically withdrawing from his society, Mencken gloried in the material prosperity of the Twenties, remained solidly within his culture, and from this vantage point pronounced American civilization a huge but vastly amusing fraud.

One way to characterize Menckonian individualism is to treat it

as simply a rather bald example of cultural nihilism. Individualism, demonstrated by assailing that which society holds sacred, reduces to iconoclasm, and no occasion is missed to point out that the Emperor is, in fact, nude. This narrow concept of individualism, which Mencken exemplified, can exist whenever men totally reject the prevailing norms of their society, but only when individualism is restricted to this meaning is the Menckonian version more than a historical curiosity.

It would be more accurate, however, to consider Mencken as representative of a type of individualism which flourished in a specific period of American history, namely, from the end of World War I to the beginning of the Great Depression. It is now apparent that beneath the facade of triviality which Mencken himself helped to create, traditional behavior patterns were being undermined as the benefits of modern technology were extended to the economy as a whole. For the first time, consumer durables were being mass produced, the automobile was revolutionizing social mobility, and, as industrialization proceeded, the United States was increasingly being transformed from an agrarian to an urban society. Rural attitudes and beliefs were often rejected before urban values could be appropriated and internalized, with resulting cultural confusion. To Mencken this meant only that he would experience no difficulty in slaking his "unashamed taste for the bizarre and indelicate, by congenital weakness for comedy of the grosser varieties. The United States, to my mind, is incomparably the greatest show on earth."⁴

Viewed historically, Menckonian individualism thus logically resulted from the union of a man who had long been convinced of his "congenital"—the term is a favorite of Mencken's—superiority to the mass of his fellows with a decade particularly susceptible to "comedy of the grosser varieties." He prided himself on his German ancestry,⁵ contact with ordinary Americans in Baltimore confirmed his conviction of hereditary superiority, and a sympathetic reading of Nietzsche seems to have increased his arrogance. If Mencken did not discern in his own personality the traits of the *Übermensch*, he could at least count himself among the elite from which the Nietzschean *Übermenschen* might someday evolve.⁶ Armed with this unquestioned assumption of moral and intellectual superiority and fortified by a prose style fully sensitive to the color of the American language, Mencken judged American culture and found it an unqualified disaster.

With the exceptions of economics, where he was rigorously ortho-

dox, and civil liberties, which he genuinely cherished, few institutions escaped his scorn, and with his uproarious, though specious generalizations, he shattered the pretensions of politicians, academics, the clergy, journalists, social reformers, and frauds of every variety. Among critics, Mencken was the greatest debunker of the Twenties, but his contribution to American culture was wholly a negative one. His basic attitude toward life was summarized in an editorial written in collaboration with George Jean Nathan for the first issue of *The American Mercury*. Their magazine, they claimed, would be unique among American periodicals because

. . . it is entirely devoid of messianic passion. The Editors have heard no Voice from the burning bush. They will not cry up and offer for sale any sovereign balm, whether political, economic, or aesthetic, for all the sorrows of the world . . . they doubt that any such sovereign balm exists or that they will ever see it hereafter. The world, as they see it, is set down with at least a score of painful diseases, all of them chronic and incurable; nevertheless, they cling to the notion that human existence remains predominantly charming.⁷

Like Thoreau, Mencken believed he was born to live in the world, not change it. However hopelessly mediocre American life might be, Mencken found it far too amusing to consider "signing-off," and it is this perennial quest for amusement that distinguishes the Menckonian individualist. Implicit in the tone of his writings are the assumptions that Mencken and his reader constitute two of a handful of the "genuinely superior" men left in America; that the proper function of such men is simply to deflate common illusions; and that the supply of native quackeries and imbecilities is inexhaustible. The Menckonian individualist proved his superiority by relentlessly attacking the values of the American society in the Twenties. Only members of the "civilized minority" were capable of this means of self-expression, and, since American culture was unmistakably stamped with the prejudices of its inferior, grasping majority, elitist iconoclasm became the expression of individualism.

Mencken's argument against social reform has a Spencerian flavor. Both men embraced Darwinism, and both believed that conscious attempts to reform society were dangerous as well as futile. Nevertheless, while Spencer envisioned evolution as an inexorable process leading men ultimately to some ill-defined state of perfection and felt

that reforms would only interfere with the evolutionary mechanism, Mencken gratuitously dismissed reform proposals on the grounds that the overwhelming majority of Americans were "congenitally" incapable of significant self-improvement in any form.

According to Mencken, social and political problems confronting the nation were either insignificant or irremedial, and hence nothing should be done. It is notorious that Mencken did not seriously address himself to really significant issues. For example, although American farmers felt the effects of the Depression long before 1929, Mencken could discover in the farmers' complaints about falling prices only additional evidence of the innate selfishness of the Bauer, who was, after all, ". . . simply a tedious fraud and ignoramus, a cheap rogue and hypocrite, the eternal Jack of the human pack. He deserves all that he suffers under our economic system, and more."⁸ Wit became an essentially evasive device, allowing Mencken to sidestep the more difficult task of dealing positively with social ills. This attitude of complacency toward social problems is predicated upon good times, a fact which Mencken dimly recognized in his celebrated essay, "On Being an American." Less hardy intellectuals might renounce the United States as a sterile civilization, but Mencken himself would remain, "on the dock, wrapped in the flag,"⁹ because only in America could his requisites for happiness be fully realized. He must be

- a. Well-fed, unhounded by sordid cares, at ease in Zion.
- b. Full of a comfortable feeling of superiority to the masses of my fellow-men.
- c. Delicately and unceasingly amused according to my tastes.¹⁰

General prosperity, the assurance of one's superiority and the endless search for amusement, then, are all closely related to Menckonian individualism. Well-fed himself, Mencken wrote for equally affluent readers, fellow elitists eager to relish the mob's latest inanity. These keys to Mencken's happiness furnish the basic explanation of his precipitous decline in public esteem and influence with the advent of the Depression. When the prosperity of the Twenties proved illusory, fewer people found Mencken's polemics funny or relevant. Nothing in Mencken's experience had prepared him for an economic crisis akin to the Depression, and Charles Angoff, Mencken's critical biographer and close associate on the Mercury, relates that Mencken long remained skeptical of the Depression's seriousness. He persistently

referred to it as an invention of "charity racketeers."¹¹ When *Mercury* sales dropped from 60,000 to 20,000 a month, he left the magazine and went into semi-isolation at his Baltimore home, emerging periodically to denounce the New Deal as a "political racket . . . that and nothing more."¹² His world was gone forever.

Menckonian individualism, then, was basically a phenomenon of the Twenties. Some insight into his notion of individualism may be gained through an inspection of *Notes on Democracy*, his attempt to analyze democratic man which appeared in 1926. Analysis of this book helps to clarify the assumptions which lie behind Mencken's theory of the individualist as elitist iconoclast.

In *Notes on Democracy*, Mencken attempted to provide scientific documentation for what was actually a simplistic intuition concerning the "inferiority of the mob." To his chagrin, contemporaries received the book coolly, and one close friend told Mencken that he had a "fishmonger's view of the world."¹³ Read today, it is difficult to disagree. What is one to make of a work purporting to contribute seriously to democratic theory which begins, "Democracy came into the Western world to the tune of sweet, soft music."¹⁴ Characteristic Menckonian sarcasm, vituperation, specious generalizations, and false analogies abound, so that while the book is a delight to read, it is difficult to believe Mencken is entirely in earnest.

All sensible men have observed that human beings differ markedly in mental ability, and now, Mencken remarks, this commonsense finding has been confirmed by modern intelligence tests. From this fact of unequal abilities Mencken concludes that only a few gifted individuals have the intellectual capacity to reject the "immemorial fears of the race . . . the vast majority of men are congenitally incapable of any such intellectual progress."¹⁵ No empirical evidence of consequence is adduced to support this sweeping generalization. Fear and envy motivate these pathetic creatures, and, since ultimate political power in a democracy rests with the people (read mob), "The statesman becomes, in the last analysis, a mere witch-hunter, a glorified smeller and snooper, eternally chanting 'Fe, Fi, Fo, Fum!'"¹⁶ Nor could the tone of politics be raised by persuading "genuinely superior" men to run for public office; such a proposal would be analogous, in Mencken's opinion, to suggesting that the "remedy for prostitution is to fill the bawdy-houses with virgins."¹⁷ This analogy of course makes a farce of politics. The Menckonian individualist considers politics an

amusing pastime, but unworthy of active participation. This stance of political withdrawal among American intellectuals was largely destroyed by the Depression, which saw a goodly number of former Mercury subscribers join the New Deal.

According to Mencken, ideals of freedom and honor lie eternally beyond the reach of the average citizen and "belong only to his superiors."¹⁸ Only an elite possesses the heritage of true freedom, all of whom, Mencken contends,

. . . descended, whether legitimately or by adultery, from the lords of the soil or from the patricians of the free towns. It is my contention that such a heritage is necessary in order that the concept of liberty . . . [be] grasped—that such ideas cannot be implanted in the mind of man at will, but must be bred in as all other basic ideas are bred in.¹⁹


Characteristically, Mencken makes no attempt to prove his statement, and the reader wonders what sort of "liberty" he had in mind. Reversing Robert Owen, Mencken totally ignores the influence of environment upon intelligence. For him, heredity alone accounts for excellence or for inferiority. In a metaphor reminiscent of the folk beliefs of the more untutored segregationists, Mencken argues that "It takes quite as long to breed a libertarian as it takes to breed a race-horse. Neither may be expected to issue from a farm-mare."²⁰ Suffice it to say that Mencken would have difficulty locating a reputable social scientist who would take his oversimplified views on intelligence seriously today.

Individualism of the Menckonian variety disappeared when the Depression revealed its inherent shallowness. Based on nothing more enduring than a perennial search for the amusing and the vulgar (and granting that there was much that was amusing and vulgar in American culture in the Twenties as well as today), Menckonian individualism was out of place, to put it mildly, in a period of widespread economic collapse. To the modern reader it appears escapist—hence charming—but essentially superficial. It is difficult to imagine a modern Mencken, for the exigencies of the atomic age do not permit an attitude of unvarnished negativism or unconcern. The Menckonian individualist observes and ridicules, but he does not participate, and this is his ultimate failure. "The United States," he once wrote, "is

essentially a commonwealth of third-rate men,"²¹ and in the history of American individualism, it is difficult to believe that Menckonian individualism was itself more than a third-rate variety.

NOTES

1. H. L. Mencken, *H. L. Mencken: Prejudices; A Selection*, ed. James T. Farrell (New York: Vintage, 1959), p. 90.
2. H. L. Mencken, *Notes on Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1926), pp. 15-16. The quotation, with its juxtaposition of congressman and ice-wagon driver, is a good example of Mencken's style, which emphasizes reader shock.
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley (New York: Vintage, 1954), II, p. 104.
4. H. L. Mencken, *H. L. Mencken: Prejudices . . .*, p. 21.
5. Edgar Kemler, *The Irreverent Mr. Mencken* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1950), pp. 10-12.
6. H. L. Mencken's *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1908, was the first full-length treatment of Nietzsche's thought published in America. *Op. cit.*, pp. 26-29.
7. H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, "Editorial," *The American Mercury*, I (January 1924), p. 27.
8. H. L. Mencken, *H. L. Mencken: Prejudices . . .*, p. 159.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 90. 10. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
11. Charles Angoff, *H. L. Mencken: A Portrait from Memory* (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1961), p. 212.
12. H. L. Mencken, *H. L. Mencken on Politics*, ed. Malcolm Moos, (New York: Vintage, 1960), p. 336.
13. Angoff, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
14. H. L. Mencken, *Notes on Democracy*, p. 3. 15. *Ibid.*, p. 21 (Italics added.)
16. *Ibid.*, p. 22. 17. *Ibid.*, p. 107. 18. *Ibid.*, p. 31. 19. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
21. H. L. Mencken, *H. L. Mencken: Prejudices . . .*, p. 98.

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