

## PERSPECTIVE ON DISSENT

Address to the Seattle Pacific College Student Body by  
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For the teacher, particularly in the field of history and the social studies, it has been an interesting observation to see how certain ideas, held only by a minority a few years back, have come to be generally accepted, and to observe how he himself perhaps has shifted in his point of view on social issues.

The very possibility, and probability, of this occurring, if one is not entirely blind to new light on problems and environmental factors, tends to make the scholar tolerant toward those who dare to stand out from the crowd in the first place as dissenters against what they judge to be a threat to the general good. At the time of their dissent we let them register their opposition in lonely solitude, being anxious as most of us are not to be obtrusive or obnoxious and to get along with the majority, only to find ourselves later possibly embracing the very ideas for which our lonely dissenters were anathematized.

Dissent is an indispensable ingredient in a democratic society. Our British cousins have respect for the role of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, and it would be nothing short of disastrous were we Americans to minimize the importance of a strong two party system, wherein the party in office is subjected to close scrutiny by a political opposition.

Though this presentation is concerned largely with the dissent of liberalism and what has been termed utopianism, the need for a healthy balance between property and human rights is essential. If society is not to become chaotic, certain conservative checks must be maintained which will conserve what is best of the past while adaptations are made to meet changing needs. From the days of Periclean Athens to the United States of America, the need for some degree of restraint upon the will of the people as a whole by the conservative forces of the state has been demonstrated. Certainly one of the elements of strength in the success of the Constitution of the United States is its system of checks and balances, which has aided this nation in avoiding excesses of democratic impulse, such as occurred in the Athenian democracy after the conservative Areopagus was stripped of political power.

My hope this morning is that we might gain a little better perspective or understanding of the significance of the role played by the dissenter in society. Every generation has its seers or dreamers who prophetically look ahead of their own time to a better and more equitable social order. Emerson expressed the basic urge of this class when he said that man is born to be a reformer. Motivated by a kind of inspired discontent, these welcome whatever social change is necessary to meet the needs of their own and subsequent generations. Life and society are in constant flux, whereas the institutions of our social order tend to become stationary and encrusted with unsocial and possibly even anti-social elements. Because these institutions do not adapt promptly and

in step with constantly changing needs of humanity, we have the problem of a time lag, for example, between industrial change and political adjustment. Laws and institutions once quite adequate, may no longer meet the needs of a new day. Thus recurring crises of collective dissatisfaction are a feature of the continually shifting forces of our civilization.

This condition of inequity provides a battle ground for the liberal, or progressive as he may be called, in American history, to attack entrenched privilege. Every student of American history recalls the struggle to secure desperately needed social legislation, such as workmen's compensation, protection for women in industry, child labor laws, only to have them invalidated at first as being in trespass upon recognized property rights. But the American progressive persisted and refused to acquiesce tamely in a fatalism which would bind man to a predestined economic condition. Economic laws were not immutable to these dissenters. Man was not a helpless victim doomed to a bare subsistence by some iron law of wages, nor would they accept the "divine right" dictum of the mine operators in a noted strike early in this century, that the interests of the workers should be left, as they put it, not to "labor agitators" but to the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given the control of the property interests of the country.

This group of look aheaders, who insist in pointing out to us the wide gap between present reality and future possibility, are often

greeted with sneers and jeers and derided as impractical visionaries, heretics, radicals, people of diseased mentality. The jibe of Macauley illustrates this disparaging attitude--that he would prefer an acre in Middlesex to a whole principality in Utopia. The men who painstakingly investigated the Teapot Dome scandals of the Harding administration were rewarded for their services with venomous accusations and denounced as "assassins of character." It would seem that these critics of their age are destined to ridicule from their contemporaries of lesser perception, for holding ideas disturbing to the status quo, and which society some day, in the march of events, may overtake.

Moreover, this class may include men of originality, creativeness, and imagination. The very element of originality suggests the rather rough, unpolished, and even unconventional behavior of many of these which has in itself tended to offend the sensibilities of their contemporaries. One need only to mention such names as that ugly gadfly of Athens, Socrates, or Henry Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Thorstein Veblen, or in our own time that man described as the most unloved figure in the eyes of America's educational administrators, Admiral Rickover.

In any consideration of dissent, a distinction must be made between the courageous visionary, dedicated to the welfare of humankind, as opposed to the dissent which is born of an unbalanced mind, spawning its myriads of crackpots, and unscrupulous demagogues skilled in the practice of innuendo and the smear. It is lamentable that in some cases these dangerous fomentors of social discord are motivated by misguided idealism

and a false sense of mission. Somewhere they have lost their perspective, inflicting greater harm on society than the evil they seek to eradicate. Much as we admire the dignity with which John Brown faced his martyrdom, the fact remains that he was guilty of heinous crime. And in our own day we simply cannot condone the rantings of the John Birchites, who in their indiscriminate attack of the enemy, without and within, would undermine the very foundations of freedom and the privilege of dissent.

It is in our relations with this extremist fringe that we find our adherence to the principle of dissent most sorely tested. It comes down to this that we must be tolerant so far as possible with the intolerant. This is not easy, but even the misguided hate-spreaders, have rights which society must protect--if we wish our rights protected. This does not mean that society cannot deal with these people when their actions become criminal and an overt danger to the state. Even at the point where punishment is being meted out for crime, moderation is more sensible than vengeance. How much better it would have been for Governor Wise of Virginia to have lived up to his name and committed John Brown to a mental asylum, where he properly belonged, than to have made him a martyr on the gallows.

Admittedly the dissenter or utopian has often had serious limitations of outlook, many times spinning his ideas out of theory alone, without an adequate understanding of the physical or economic bases of society. Very often he has made the error of oversimplifying the causes of society's ills. Some have assumed too trustingly that history was on

their side and that progress in society was foreordained. Many have erected beautiful social edifices on the false foundation of the perfectibility of human nature. Rousseau stated that man was originally perfect but corrupted by environment; however more than one reformer, including Robert Owen, found in the pathetic crash of his utopian community that to simply modify the environment did not guarantee that men would act as angels. They discovered moreover that human nature resists such structures as communal sharing of all property and family life. Life is a constant struggle and always will be; to attempt to eliminate all struggle is naive and based on an incorrect understanding of human nature this side of the millenium.

Yet, with all their shortcomings, the social idealists perform an immeasurable service to their day. In this twentieth century of scientific and physical miracle, we should be less willing to admit that the improbable dreams of yesterday are impossible of reality. Our dreaming may not be so far-fetched in the long run of history.

Furthermore the cause of progressivism needs its visionaries and utopian dreamers, as much as it needs machinery for reform. It requires its thinkers and theorists as much as its practical politicians. And even if an ideal were never to be realized, there may be sound value in the very ideal itself. Man is moved by what he imagines, as well as by what he can see and touch. If the criterion for measuring the usefulness of the visionary or utopian to society is based purely on immediate, tangible results, such as a political or legislative victory, then the

visionary may well be written off as supernumerary. But in the long run struggle for principle and moral standards, what appears to be present defeat may turn out to be pure gain.

The very vision of these seers helps to loosen the dead hand of the past upon our day; it encourages the groping for new solutions and the social experimentation necessary to overcome stagnation. This is particularly true in times of national economic and political crises.

The past is replete with instances of dreamers whose visions have materialized for the betterment of mankind. This generation of ours needs to be reminded of the dramatic eradication of slavery in country after country in the nineteenth century--an age old dream of centuries of reformers. With all of their limitations, who can deny the influence of such English utopians as Sir Thomas More of the sixteenth century and Robert Owen, three hundred years later, in inspiring reform in the fields of education, penology, cooperatives, and labor legislation? James Harrington of Cromwell's time, wrote Oceana, the most popular utopia of his day, in which he attempted to set forth the basic principles of the constitution of an ideal state. This work so deeply influenced John Adams in his draft of the constitution of Massachusetts that one delegate, facetiously or otherwise, proposed that the name of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts be changed to Oceana. The influence of this utopia is to be seen also in the constitutions of other states, and in that of the United States itself.

Seventy-five years ago Edward Bellamy published his utopian romance,

Looking Backward, in which he pictured the perfect society as he envisioned it in 2000 A.D. Selling over a million copies, this novel made a tremendous impact upon the liberal thought of his time. It gave birth to the Nationalist movement, which influenced the significant Populist Party of the late nineteenth century, which again in turn, made a strong impression upon the William Jennings Bryan wing to the Democratic Party.

Thorstein Veblen was a professional economist and brilliant Ph.D., who gained little recognition while living, partly because of personal traits offensive to his contemporaries, but whose virus affected a handful of discerning scholars, who recognized in such works as The Theory of the Leisure Class, "satire unique in scholarship and originality." Choosing the prosaic academic monograph to express himself, this man was unsparing in his indictment of what he considered antiquated or ancestral habits of thought which barred progress so sorely needed in sectors of the society of his time. Today no serious study of the period can ignore the contribution of this dissenter.

That highly controversial literary figure, Walt Whitman, apart from his break with the conventional in his themes and in his poetic style, beat a veritable gong of revolt in his Leaves of Grass. "I am a radical of radicals," he once put it, in his passionate dissent against the injustices of the shoddy society of his day. In his Leaves of Grass he draw a memorable picture of the Great City--his democratic commonwealth of the future--but for the moment this was only a so-called dream, cruelly mocked and nullified by the sordid operations of the Drews, Fisks,



and Goulds of the Gilded Age of our American life. His crudities may be forgotten in time; certainly his passion and aspiration for America will continue to live on.

Henry George, appalled at the great paradox of his society--that as his country made phenomenal strides in technological and economic progress, the problem of poverty was becoming more and more desperate. Something clearly was wrong. Rather than raising the level of all living standards to a respectable decency, our advances in industry, our amassing of wealth--all seemed to be widening the gap between rich and poor. This ought not to be, and thus in his masterpiece, Progress and Poverty, a kind of prose-poem, Henry George sought to arouse the conscience of his generation. With the perspective gained in the eighty-three years since the publication of this work, we can quickly dismiss his proposal of the single-tax; however the fervor of his writing has continued for over three quarters of a century to inspire men to cope with inequity in society, to the end that America may be democratic in fact as well as in profession.

And, if time allowed, this array of pioneering dissenters, ridiculed first but later honored, could be lengthened to include the Henry Demarest Lloyds and Ida Tarbells who dared to write their fact-studded essays of exposures of the "industrial statesman" of their day, who also played the dual role of "robber barons"; of the Horace Manns and Henry Barnards who dedicated their lives to the reform of public education, only to be denounced as purveyors of "socialized" education; of the frail Dorothea

Dixes whose hearts were touched by the calloused treatment of the prisoner and the insane, of the Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stantons who were willing to accept the derision of their contemporaries for their wildly radical insistence "that all men and women are created equal;" of the Jane Addamses who attacked the evils of the slum through the establishment of settlement houses; of the Peter Altgelds who had the integrity to risk political suicide, rather than to incarcerate anarchists, against whom no overt criminal act was proven; and of the many other dissenters against the injustices of an ingrown status quo, who were by no means infallible, whose idealism in some cases was misguided--but who, in a society which had forgotten its own revolutionary beginnings and had subordinated everything to the material level of profits, kept alive a spirit of equality and community welfare.

Our debt to these prophets of dissent, in warning us against the dangers of a blind adherence to the past, can never be overstated. At home, as well as abroad, we Americans in our diplomacy and in our missionary effort have found ourselves too frequently identified with an outdated economic, social, and political order on the part of people crying for change in this changing world. Confronted by the most threatening ideological challenge in our history, we must be more alert to the dynamism and revolutionary character of our own society. As Americans we deny the charge that we are a reactionary, decadent, capitalistic society which has passed its hey-day and is now merely attempting to maintain a precarious defense of the status-quo. Rather, we will

point out as President Kennedy did to Premier Khrushchev that the United States itself had its beginnings in that bad word, Revolution; we assert that we do not need foreign brands of radicalism; that we have our own tradition of dissent and progressivism which, through the years, has provided us with an indigenous radicalism in harmony with our own American experience.

Likewise to the pseudo super patriots, who today inflict our society with their mouthings of Americanism--who would identify all dissent with Communism or Socialism--we contend that a stand against privilege and monopoly is characteristically American; that in our mixed economy in the United States, some elements of our system necessarily require social planning and that some forms of socialism are not incompatible with democracy; that all class bitterness in our life cannot be blamed on foreign agitators; that the way to meet the challenge of our time is to make democratic society function for the benefit of all, and not to deny its citizens the underlying freedoms of a free society.

President Kennedy has wisely warned the nation against an irrational hysteria which extremist groups would foist upon us. More specifically another spokesman for the administration has cautioned the American people against the ultras who 'under the banner of patriotism' and 'with the excuse of combating Communism' are opposign dissent as being unpatriotic. These ultras, to some degree or other, he has said would 'spy upon their neighbors, impeach the judiciary, support the intrusion of politics into the military, abandon the United Nations, 'impose upon

the land styling uniformity falsely labelled as loyalty', deny dissent and 'impose patriotism from above by executive fiat'.

America has never idolized its dissenters--somehow they have never appealed to the legend makers. Nevertheless these disturbers of complacency deserve a niche in our American heritage along with statesmen, military leaders, gridiron heroes, and our titans of industry and finance. As intelligent American citizens may we ever preserve the precious right of honest dissent!