

H. L. Mencken: Man of Ideas

By ROBERT M. THORNTON

H. L. Mencken was the darling of many "intellectuals" at the height of his popularity from, say, 1910 until the early nineteen-thirties. After that, he was dismissed as a reactionary who was out of touch with the times and suspect as a purveyor of ideas. Of course, Mencken did have his blind spots but he saw clearly on many things, often far ahead of his contemporaries.

During the nineteen-twenties and thirties, many "intellectuals" were enchanted with socialism or some other form of the collectivist state. Mencken was as critical as anyone of American society, but he saw clearly that the market economy (capitalism, as he called it), whatever its faults, is responsible for our great material wealth; replacing it with some sort of planned economy will only make us all poorer, not richer. In 1935, he wrote:

"We owe to it (capitalism) almost everything that passes under the general name of civilization today. The extraordinary progress of the world since the middle ages has not been due to the mere expenditure of human energy, nor even to the flights of human genius, for men had worked since the remotest times, and some of them had been of surpassing intellect. No, it has been due to the accumulation of capital."

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Mencken was one of the early critics of what was mistakenly called "progressive education," and in 1918 wrote:

"The aim seems to be to reduce the whole teaching process to a sort of automatic reaction, to discover some master formula that will not only take the place of competence and resourcefulness in the teacher but that will also create an artificial receptivity in the child. Teaching becomes a thing in itself, separable from and superior to the thing taught."

All of this, continued Mericken, is in sharp contrast to the old theory of teaching when technique was simplified and subordinated. All it demanded of the teacher was to master the facts of his subject — and provide himself with a stout rattan. He was tested only for his actual capacity to teach. There was no technique to master and hence none to hide. "He could not conceal a hopeless inability to impart knowledge beneath a correct professional method."

The ability to impart knowledge, wrote Mencken, has little to do with technical method. Rather it is having a "natural talent for dealing with children, for getting into their minds, for putting things in a way that they can comprehend." Secondly, it consists of "a deep belief in the interest and importance of the thing taught, a concern about it amounting to a kind of passion." So a teacher who knows his subject thoroughly and is filled with enthusiasm for it can usually teach it with success, however little he knows of technical pedagogy.

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In the political arena, Mencken was especially keen. Nearly eighty years ago, he declared that the ideal government of all reflective men "is one which lets the individual alone — one which barely escapes being no government at all." Being realistic, he added that this ideal "will be realized in the world twenty or thirty centuries after I have passed from these scenes and taken up my public duties in Hell."

In 1924, Mencken offered a fine declaration, in brief, of his political philosophy. "Government," Mencken said, quoting William Godwin, "can have no more than two legitimate purposes: the suppression of injustice against individuals within the community and the common defense against external invasion." Few people, he noted, were able to "differentiate clearly between government as a necessary device for maintaining order

in the world, and government as a device for maintaining the authority and prosperity of predatory rascals and swindlers." The government, wrote Mencken, more than seventy years ago,

"has taken on a mass of new duties and responsibilities; it has spread out its powers until they penetrate to every act of the citizen, however secret; it has begun to throw around its operations the high dignity and impeccability of a State religion; its agents become a separate and superior caste, with authority to bind and loose, and their thumbs in every pot. But it remains, as it was in the beginning, the common enemy of all well-disposed, industrious, and decent men."

In 1940, Mencken remarked again about government gradually taking over the entire business of living. It not only undertakes to carry on the customary enterprises of government with constant embellishment but also horns into highly non-political matters; it attempts to "succor every one who feels he is suffering from injustice," and if there should be "something you want but can't get, it will get that something for you." He was ignored, and today we have the "Nanny State," horning in on even more non-political matters.

This was not what the Founding Fathers intended when they wrote the Constitution, which limited the powers of government. Knowing that efforts would be made to change the Constitution, "they made the process as difficult as possible, and hoped that they had prevented frequent resort to it. Unhappily, they did not foresee the possibility of making changes, not by formal act, but by mere political intimidation, not by recasting its terms, but by distorting their meaning. The Constitution," continued Mencken, "is completely at the mercy of a gang of demagogues consecrated to reading into it governmental powers that are not only wholly foreign to its spirit, but categorically repugnant to its terms."