

Life without Prejudice

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"Prejudice" becomes a flail to beat enemies—traditional distinctions, essential to a workable society, come under assault as founded on prejudice.

WHEN ONE SETS OUT to discover how "prejudice" became a fighting word, some interesting political history comes to light. Everybody is aware that this term is no longer used in its innocent sense of "prejudgment." It is used, instead, as a flail to beat enemies. Today the air resounds with charges of "prejudice," and the shrill note given it by the "liberals," and radicals suggests a considerable reservoir of feeling and purpose behind its invocation. This appears all the more striking when one recalls that in the controversial literature of a hundred years ago—or even of a couple of generations ago—you do not encounter the sort of waving of the bloody shirt of prejudice that greets you on all sides now. Men did not profess such indignation that other men had differing convictions and viewpoints. They rather expected to encounter these, and to argue with them as best they could. You do not find the tricky maneuvers and the air of what might be called ultraism that we are familiar with today.

What has changed the atmosphere? I would point to the world-wide revolutionary movement which has manifested itself in almost every land. The indictment for prejudice has been one of the most potent weapons in the armory of its agents. There is need to realize what this indictment masks

and how it operates, both politically and logically.

It is getting to be a bore to bring communism into every article that deals with a topic of public concern, but here the connection is so close that one finds no option. For the doctrines of Moscow are the *fons et origo* of the great pressure to eradicate "prejudice." A prime object of militant communism is to produce a general social skepticism. Not that the communists are skeptics themselves. They are the world's leading dogmatists and authoritarians. But in order to bring about their dogmatic reconstruction of the world they need to produce this skepticism among the traditional believers. They need to make people question the supports of whatever social order they enjoy, to encourage a growing dissatisfaction and a feeling that they have inherited a bad article. The more subtle of them realize, no doubt, that people can be made to forget how well a system is working right under their noses if they can be allured and distracted with "pie in the sky." The communist version of pie in the sky shall be dealt with in a moment when the logical method is considered. Just now I emphasize this unfixing of faith as one of the steps in a large-scale and—it must be confessed—cunning plan. This world-wide revolutionary movement, openly conducted in some countries, operating from hiding in others, wants first of all to clear the ground.

To this end, what it knows that it must overcome is the binding element, or the cohesive force that holds a society together. For as long as this integrative power remains strong, the radical attack stands refuted and hopeless. This will explain the

peculiar virulence with which communists attack those transcendental unifiers like religion, patriotism, familial relationship, and the like. It will also explain, if one penetrates the matter shrewdly, why they are so insistent upon their own programs of conformity, levelling, and de-individualization.

However paradoxical it may appear at first sight, we find when we examine actual cases that communities create a shared sentiment, a oneness, and a loyalty through selective differentiation of the persons who make them up. A society is a structure with many levels, offices, and roles, and the reason we feel grateful to the idea of society is that one man's filling his role makes it possible for another to fill his role, and so on. Because the policeman is doing his policeman's job, the owner of the bakery can sleep well at night. Because plumbers and electricians are performing their functions, doctors and lawyers are free to perform theirs, and the reverse. This is a truistic observation, no doubt, but too little attention is given to the fact that society exists in and through its variegation and multiplicity, and when we speak of a society's "breaking down," we mean exactly a confusing of these roles, a loss of differentiation, and a consequent waning of the feeling of loyalty. Society makes possible the idea of vocation, which is the primary source of distinctions. The ceaseless campaign of the communists to make every people a mass has as its object the erasing of those distinctions which are the expression of this idea. In the communist Utopia Comrade Jones would work in the mines, and Comrade Smith would write political articles for the party organ, or perhaps he would be assigned the task of proving the non-existence of metaphysics. Their "comradeship" would be of far greater importance than their vocations, but to what end? The answer to this lies in some Messianic idea derived from the prophecies of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin.

The point is that their hostility to distinctions of all kinds as we know them in our society conceals a desire to dissolve that society altogether. And we see that practi-

cally all traditional distinctions, whether economic, moral, social, or aesthetic, are today under assault as founded on a prejudice. This shows itself in everything from the more absurd theorems of "democratic action" to the ideal of "non-competitive education," by which teachers who ought to be on the dunce's stool themselves have been led half the distance to Moscow.

Although the aim is this general social skepticism, the communists and their helpers are sufficiently experienced in ideological warfare to know that it is often bad policy to attack everything at once. To do this may cast doubt upon your own motives and cause people to suspect that something is wrong with you. Often the best tactic is to single out some special object and concentrate your force upon this, while feigning a benevolent attitude toward the rest of the order. This enables you to appear a critic and a patriot at the same time. It is a guiltless-looking role because most of us object to and would like to reform one or more of our country's institutions, even though we have profound attachment to it as a whole.

The difference with the communist is that this is part of a plan to discredit and do away with the whole. And this is why it is important to note the political method by which he proceeds.

He knows that if you can weaken one after another of the supporting pillars, the structure must eventually collapse. He works, then, like a termite, except that he selects and directs his effort. First things first and one thing at a time. He chooses some feature of an order where there is a potential of resentment, or he may choose some feature about which people are simply soft-headed—that is to say, confused or uncertain. It may be the existence of rich men; it may be the right to acquire and use property privately; it may be the idea of discipline and reward in education; it may be some system of preferential advancement which produces envy in the less successful. His most common maneuver, as previously suggested, is to vilify this as founded upon "prejudice." The burden of his argument

usually is that since these do not have perfectly rationalized bases, they have no right to exist. You will find especially that he pours his scorn—and this seems a most important clue to his mentality—upon those things for which people have a natural (and in his sense irrational) affection. The modern communist, looking upon this world with its interesting distinctions and its prolific rewards and pleasures, may be compared to Satan peering into the Garden. Milton tells us that the arch-fiend

“Saw undelighted all delight.”

The more he sees people attached to their theoretically impossible happiness, the more determined he is to bring on the fall.

Just as the marshals of the communist movement have worked politically with more cleverness than many people give them credit for, so they have often been better logicians than those in the opposite camp. The fact will partly explain the sense of frustration felt by defenders of our traditional structural Western society. In their polemic use of the term “prejudice,” however, they have been better logicians in the shyster’s way: they have confused the other side with a boldly maintained fallacy.

The fallacy contained in the charge “prejudice,” as it is usually employed to impeach somebody’s judgment, has long been familiar to logicians, by whom it was given the name *argumentum ad ignorantiam*. This signifies an argument addressed to ignorance. The reason for the appellation will appear in an analysis of how the fallacy operates. Those who are guilty of the *argumentum ad ignorantiam* profess belief in something because its opposite cannot be proved, or they assert the existence of something because the something possibly may exist. It is possible that life exists on Mars; therefore life does exist on Mars. In the realm where “prejudice” is now most an issue, it normally takes a form like this: you cannot prove—by the method of statistics and quantitative measurement—that men are not equal. Therefore men are equal. You cannot prove that human beings are natu-

rally wicked. Therefore they are naturally good, and the contrary opinion is a prejudice. You cannot prove—again by the methods of science—that one culture is higher than another. Therefore the culture of the Digger Indians is just as good as that of Muncie, Indiana, or thirteenth century France.

Generally speaking, this type of fallacious reasoning seeks to take advantage of an opponent by confusing what is abstractly possible with what is really possible or what really exists. Expressed in another way, it would substitute what is possible in theory for that which we have some grounds, even though not decisive ones, for believing. It is possible in some abstract sense that all men are equal. But according to the Bible, Aristotle, and most considerate observers, men are not equal in natural capacity, aptitude for learning, moral education, and so on. If you can get the first belief substituted for the second, on the claim that the second cannot be proved, you have removed a “prejudice.” And along with it, you have removed such perception as you have of reality.

The “pie in the sky” appeal of the communists consequently comes in this guise: you cannot prove the unworkability of the communist or statist Utopia; therefore it is workable. I say “cannot prove,” although there are multitudinous evidences that it has never worked along the lines and with the motivations that are always suggested in its favor. One might indeed borrow a famous apothegm and say that all theory is for it and all experience is against it. However, since the appeal is to the dislocated, the resentful, the restless, and the malcontented, it has won its followers. We have seen how they charge the rest of us with being prejudiced in favor of the present order, or whatever feature of it they have singled out for attack. Often they manage to conceal the fallacy underlying their position by a vocabulary and a tone which intimidate the conservative into feeling ignorant.

A critical examination of their logic

therefore deserves priority. But after we have seen the worst that can be said against the type of ideas which they condemn as prejudices, we ought to inquire whether such ideas are capable of positive good.

A number of years ago John Grier Hibben, a professor of logic at Princeton and later president of that university, wrote a temperate essay entitled "A Defense of Prejudice." Professor Hibben demonstrated in some detail why it is a mistake to classify all those notions which people denominate prejudices as illogical. A prejudice may be an unreasoned judgment, he pointed out, but an unreasoned judgment is not necessarily an illogical judgment. He went on to list three types of beliefs for which we cannot furnish immediate logical proof, but which may nevertheless be quite in line with truth.

First, there are those judgments whose verification has simply dropped out of memory. At one time they were reached in the same way as our "logical" conclusions, but the details of the process have simply been forgotten. It is necessary to the "economy of thought" that we retire from consciousness many of the facts that were once used to support our judgments. The judgments themselves remain as a kind of deposit of thought. They are not without foundation, though the foundation is no longer present to the mind with any particularity; and the very fact that we employ these judgments successfully from day to day is fair evidence that proof would be available if needed. The judgments are part of the learning we have assimilated in the process of developing a mind.

The second type of unreasoned judgments we hold are the opinions we adopt from others—our betters in some field of learning or experience. There is no need to labor the truth that we all appropriate such opinions on a considerable scale, and if we could not do so, books and institutions of learning would lose their utility. No man in a civilized society proves more than a small percentage of the judgments he operates on, and the more advanced or complex civiliza-

tion grows, the smaller this proportion must become. If every man found it necessary to verify each judgment he proceeds on, we would all be virtual paupers in knowledge. It is well for everyone to know something concerning the *methods* of verification, but this indeed differs from having to verify all over again the hard-won and accumulated wisdom of our society. Happily there is such a thing as authority.

The third class of judgments in Professor Hibben's list comprises those which have subconscious origin. The material that furnishes their support does not reach the focal point of consciousness, but psychology insists upon its existence. The intuitions, innuendoes, and shadowy suggestions which combine to form our opinion about say, a character, could never be made public and formal in any convincing way. Yet only the most absurd doctrinaire would hold that they are therefore founded upon error. In some situations the mind uses a sort of oracular touchstone for testing what cannot be tested in any other way. My judgment that Mr. Blank, though a well-spoken and plausible gentleman, will one day betray his office is a conclusion I cannot afford to put aside, even though at the present moment I have no publicly verifiable facts from the space-time continuum which would prove it to another. It may be true that only those minds which are habituated to think logically can safely trust their intuitive conclusions, on the theory that the subconscious level will do its kind of work as faithfully as the conscious does its kind. This still leaves room for what may be termed paralogical inference.

When one thinks about these well accepted and perfectly utilitarian forms of "prejudice," the objections of the rationalists seem narrow and intolerant. There is, indeed, a good deal of empirical evidence for saying that rationalistic men are more intolerant than "prejudiced" men. The latter take the position that their judgments are reasoned conclusions, and why should one swerve or deflect from what can be proved to all reasonable men? Such are

often the authors of persecutions, massacres, and liquidations. The man who frankly confesses to his prejudices is usually more human and more humane. He adjusts amicably to the idea of his limitations. A limitation once admitted is a kind of monition not to try acting like something super-human. The person who admits his prejudices, which is to say his unreasoned judgments, has a perspective on himself.

Let me instance two cases in support of this point. When H. L. Mencken wrote his brilliant series of essays on men, life, and letters, he gave them a title as illuminating as it was honest—*Prejudices*. What he meant, if such a dull addition as a gloss may be permitted with Mencken, was that these were views based on such part of experience as had passed under his observation. There was no apology because some figures were praised and others were roundly damned, and there was no canting claim to “objectivity.” Mencken knew that life and action turn largely on convictions which rest upon imperfect inductions, or samplings of evidence, and he knew that feeling is often a positive factor. The result was a tonic criticism unrivalled in its time. Did his “unfairness” leave him unread and without influence? He castigates religion in many ways, and I have known churchmen who admire him and quote him. He thought nothing sillier than the vaporizing of most of our radicals, yet numbers of these looked to him as a mentor in writing and as a leader in every libertarian crusade. In brief, they found in him a *man*, whose prejudices had more of reality than the slogans and catchwords on political banners.

The same lesson, it seems to me, can be read in the career of Dr. Samuel Johnson. Johnson lives in considerable measure through the vitality of his prejudices. When he says to an interlocutor, “Sir, I perceive you are a vile Whig,” you know that he is speaking from a context of reality. It is not necessary that you “agree” with him. How many people do we ever “agree” with in any unreserved sense? That he hated Whigs, Scotsmen, and Americans we accept

as a sign of character; it is a kind of signature. The heartiness of his likes and dislikes constitutes an ethical proof of all he puts forward. And so it is with any formed personality. A hundred popinjays can be found to discuss brilliantly; but you will not find on every corner a man whose opinions bear a kind of witness to the man himself.

Mencken, like Johnson, is, in his more abstract political thinking, a Tory. But both men—and this is a continuation of the story—proved kind in their personal relations, and both of them were essentially modest. Upon one occasion when Boswell confessed to Johnson that he feared some things he was entering in his journal were too small, the latter advised him that nothing is too small for so small a creature as man. This is good evidence that Johnson had achieved what I referred to as perspective, which carries with it a necessary humility. And while some may be startled to hear Mencken called a modest man, I can infer nothing but a real candor and humility from those bombastic and ironical allusions to himself which comprise much of the humor of his writings. The tone he adopted was a rhetorical instrument; he had faced his limitations.

I have given some space to these examples because I feel they show that the man of frank and strong prejudices, far from being a political and social menace and an obstacle in the path of progress, is often a benign character and a helpful citizen. The chance is far greater, furthermore, that he will be more creative than the man who can never come to more than a few gingerly held conclusions, or who thinks that all ideas should be received with equal hospitality. There is such a thing as being so broad you are flat.

Life without prejudice, were it ever to be tried, would soon reveal itself to be a life without principle. For prejudices, as we have seen earlier, are often built-in principles. They are the extract which the mind has made of experience. Try to imagine a man setting out for the day without a single prejudice. Let us suppose that he has “con-

fessed" his prejudices in the manner of confessing sins and has decided to start next morning with a fresh mind as the sinner would start a new soul. The analogy is false. Inevitably he would be in a state of paralysis. He could not get up in the morning, or choose his necktie, or make his way to the office, or conduct his business affairs, or, to come right down to the essence of the thing, even maintain his identity. What he does in actuality is arise at his arbitrary 7:15, select the necktie which he is prejudiced in favor of, set off relatively happy with his head full of unreasoned judgments, conduct a successful day's business and return home the same man he was, with perhaps a mite or two added to his store of wisdom.

When Mark Twain wrote, "I know that I am prejudiced in this matter, but I would be ashamed of myself if I were not," he was giving a therapeutic insight into the phenomenon of prejudice. There is a kind of willful narrowness which should be called presumption and rebuked. But prejudice in the sense I have tried to outline here is

often necessary to our personal rectitude, to our loyalty to our whole vision. It is time, then, for the whole matter of prejudice in relation to society and conduct to be reexamined and revalued. When this is done, it will be seen that the cry of "prejudice" which has been used to frighten so many people in recent years is often no more than caterwauling. It has a scary sound, and it has been employed by the illiberal to terrify the liberal. And since the "liberal," or the man who has not made up his mind about much of anything, is today perhaps the majority type, it has added a great deal to the world's trepidation and confusion. The conservative realizes that many orthodox positions, once abandoned in panic because they were thought to be indefensible, are quite defensible if only one gives a little thought to basic issues. Surely one of these positions is the right of an individual or a society to hold a belief which, though unreasoned, is uncontradicted. When that position is secured, we shall be in better shape to fight the battle against the forces of planned disintegration.