

AMERICAN IDEALISM EXCORIATED

WE HAVE ASSUMED our "idealism" without perhaps, examining it much. We have caught up the word and passed it on without a definite meaning. Now a European radical turns it inside out and shows us some things that may cause surprize. He says that he finds "love of truth obscured in America by commercialism of which pragmatism is the philosophical expression; and love of our neighbor kept in fetters by Puritan morality." Prof. Bertrand Russell, of Cambridge, whose views on the war caused his Government to keep him in England during the struggle, finds that "faults at least as bad as those of America exist in all countries; but America seems as yet somewhat more lacking than some other countries as regards a self-critical minority." Mr. Russell's occasion for speaking in *The Freeman* (New York) is his view of the nature of our future relations with China. With them we have nothing to do in this department, but Mr. Russell's comment on our "civilization" (a subject that keeps our younger "critical minority" awake nights) is pertinent to our field. Professor Russell reads us a lesson in view of "the new temptations to which America will henceforth be exposed":

"I know there is in America a great deal of what is called 'idealism.' But what are its manifestations? Prohibition certainly is due to 'idealism.' Now there are many arguments in favor of prohibition, and I am not myself prepared to oppose it, but no student of modern psychology will suppose that these arguments were what persuaded the nation. Apart from the interests of those who make non-alcoholic drinks, and the hopes of employers that their men would work harder, it must have been the case that there were more people who found pleasure in preventing others from drinking than people who found pleasure in drinking themselves. Take another exhibition of 'idealism': the treatment of Maxim Gorky in the United States. I know there were journalistic reasons for inflaming opinion against him, but these could not have operated unless opinion were ready to be inflamed. In America divorce is easy; in Tsarist Russia it was almost impossible. Consequently, the law had not sanctioned a union far more stable than many American marriages; therefore Gorky was 'immoral' and must be hounded out of the country. Again: the Bible says 'Thou shalt not steal,' but Socialists believe that civilization can only be preserved by confiscation of private property. Therefore they are immoral men, who must not be allowed to sit in a legislature to which they have been duly elected, and whose heads may be bashed in by loyal mobs who invade their houses. Sacco and Vanzetti are accused of a murder, and there is no conclusive evidence that they committed it; but their political opinions are undesirable, so that no one is interested in the mere question of the fact: Did they, or did they not, commit the murder? The moral reprobation of these men on account of their opinions is, no doubt, another case of 'idealism.'

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"So far, 'idealism' may be identified with love of persecution. If I were concerned to analyze its unconscious psychological sources, I should say that this form of it results from a conflict between the Christian duty of loving one's neighbor and the natural man's impulse to torture him. A reconciliation is effected by the theory that one's neighbor is a 'sinner,' who must be punished in order to be purified. People cling to the conception of 'sin,' because otherwise they would have no moral justification for inflicting pain. 'Idealism,' in this form, is moral reprobation as a pretext for torture."

We are not left in sole possession of "idealism." "All belligerents were full of it during the war, and it is still rampant everywhere"—but, here is the difference:

"It is only in America, and to a lesser extent in England, that it still deceives the people who are trying to think out the problem of creating a happier world. Is it not clear that a happier world will not be generated by hatred, even if the objects of hatred are 'sinners'? Do any Christians, I wonder, ever read the Gospels?"

"'Idealism' has, however, a wider scope than persecution. It may be defined generically as the practise of proclaiming moral motives for our actions. After America's entry into the war, President Wilson became idealistic in our former sense; before that, when he was 'too proud to fight,' he was idealistic in a wider sense. **The objection to proclaiming moral motives to one's actions is two fold: first, that no one else believes what one says; and secondly, that one does believe it oneself.** I have no doubt that many Americans believe in the unselfishness of America's motives, first for neutrality and then for belligerency. People who are not Americans, however, can not be persuaded to adopt this view. They think that America intervened at the exact moment most favorable for American interests, and that America would not have become either so rich or so powerful as she is if she had intervened sooner or had remained neutral to the end. They do not blame America for this, but they are somewhat irritated when they find that Americans will not admit it, but claim to be made of nobler stuff than the rest of humanity.

"I suppose few things have done more to disgust Americans with the Old World than the secret treaties. I am not, of course, a defender of the secret treaties, but I think it is worth while to understand how a man like Lord Grey came to agree to them. I took and still take the view that the issues in the war were unimportant, that it did not matter which side won—tho a draw would have been best—and that the most important thing was that the war should end quickly. This was not the view of the belligerents. The British Government took the view—to which America was converted in the end—that the defeat of Germany was vital. We could not defeat Germany without the help of nations having no direct interest in the struggle, and we could not get their help without buying it. By the time America came in, we had built up such a strong alliance that America's strength turned the scale; but it must be admitted that America profited by our sins. Our people did not know of the secret treaties; the sins were only those of the Government; and when President Wilson declared in the Senate that he did not know of the secret treaties, the American Government showed that it shared the guilt."