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Ambrose Bierce Says: Public Opinion is Responsible for Many Fallacies

“Public opinion,” says Buckle, “being the voice of the average man, is the voice of mediocrity.” Is it therefore so very wise and infallible a guide as to be accepted without other credentials than its name and fame? Ought we to follow its light and leading with no better assurance of the character of its authority than a count of noses of those following it already, and with no inquiry as to whether it has not on many former occasions led them and their several sets of predecessors into bogs of error and over precipices to “eternal mock?” Surely the “average man,” as everyone knows him, is not very wise, not very learned, not very good: how is it that his views, of so intricate and difficult matters as those on which public opinion makes pronouncement through him are entitled to such respect? It seems to me that the average man, as I know him, is very much a fool, and something of a rogue as well. He has only a smattering of education, knows virtually nothing of political history, or history of any kind, is incapable of logical, that is to say, clear, thinking, is subject to the suasion of base and silly prejudices, and selfish beyond expression. That such a person’s opinions should be so obviously better than my own that I should accept them instead, and assist in enacting them into laws, appears to me most improbable. I may “bow to the will of the people” as gracefully as a defeated candidate, and for the same reason, namely, that I cannot help myself; but to admit that I was wrong in my belief and flatter the power that subdues me—no, that I will not do. And if nobody would do so the average man would not be so very cocksure of his infallibility and might sometimes consent to be counselled by his betters.

In any matter of which the public has imperfect knowledge, public opinion is as likely to be erroneous as is the opinion of an individual equally uninformed. To hold otherwise is to hold that wisdom can be got by combining many ignorances. A man who knows nothing of algebra cannot be assisted in the solution of an algebraic problem by calling in a neighbour who knows no more than himself, and the solution approved by the unanimous vote of ten million such men would count for nothing against that of a competent mathematician. To be entirely consistent, gentlemen enamored of public opinion should insist that the text books of our common schools should be the creation of a mass meeting, and all disagreements arising in the course of the work settled by a majority vote. That is how all difficulties incident to the popular translation of the Hebrew scriptures were composed. It should be admitted, however, that most of those voting knew a little Hebrew, though not much. A problem in mathematics is a very simple thing compared with many of those upon which the people are called to pronounce by resolution and ballot—for example, a question of finance.

“The voice of the people is the voice of God”—the saying is so respectfully old that it comes to us in the Latin. He is a strange, an unearthly politician who has not a score of times publicly and solemnly signified his faith in it. But does any of them really believe it? Let us see. In the period between 1859 and 1885, the Democratic party was defeated six times in succession. The voice of the people pronounced it in error and unfit to govern. Yet after each overthrow it came back into the field gravely reaffirming its faith in the principles that God had condemned. Then God twice reversed Himself, and the Republicans “turned a hair,”

but set about beating Him with as firm a confidence of success (justified by the event) as they had known in the years of their prosperity. Doubtless in every instance of a political party's defeat there are defections, but doubtless not all are due to the voice that spoke out of the great white light that fell about Saul of Tarsus. By the way, it is worth observing that the clever gentleman was under no illusion regarding the origin of the voice that wrought his celebrated "flop"; he did not confound it with the vox populi. The people of his time and place had no objection to the persecution that he was conducting, and could persecute a trifle themselves upon occasion.

I believe there is a pretty general demand in the Democratic party today for a re-affirmation of the principles of the Chicago platform. Col. Bryan, I understand, is no less diligent in advocacy of free coinage of silver at the ratio of sixteen to one than he was before public opinion turned him down for it less than four years ago. And on the other hand, since the voice of the people (which is the voice of God) pronounced against it, Mr. David B. Hill has found it in his queer conscience to pronounce for it. He has not actually done so, but he declares that his intentions are honourable, and he will. Where, indeed, is the man whose profession of faith in the divine wisdom of public opinion is more than a physiological phenomenon?

Majorities rule, when they do rule, not because they ought, but because they can. We vote in order to learn without fighting which party is the stronger; it is less disagreeable to learn it that way than the other way. Sometimes the party that is numerically the weaker is by possession of the government actually the stronger, and could maintain itself in power by an appeal to arms, but the habit of submitting when outvoted is hard to break. Moreover, we all recognize in a subconscious way the reasonableness of the habit as a practical method of getting on: and there is always the confident hope of success in the next canvass. That one's party will succeed because it ought to succeed is probably the most general and invincible folly affecting the human judgement. Observation cannot shake it, nor experience destroy. Though you bray a partisan in a mortar of adversity till he numbers the strokes of the pestle by the hairs of his head, yet will not this fool notion depart from him. He is always going to win the next time, however frequently and disastrously he has lost before. And he can always give you the most cogent reasons for the faith that is in him. His chief reliance is on the "fatal mistakes" made since the last election by the other party. There never was a year in which the party in power and the party out of power did not make bad mistakes—mistakes which, unlike eggs and fish, seem always worst when freshest. If idiotic errors of policy are always fatal, no party would ever win an election and there would be a hope of better government under the benign sway of the usurping domestic cow.