

On Youthful Cynicism Bertrand Russell

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Any person who visits the Universities of the Western world is liable to be struck by the fact that the intelligent young of the present day are cynical to a far greater extent than was the case formerly. This is not true of Russia, India, China or Japan; I believe it is not the case in Czechoslovakia, Jugoslavia, and Poland, nor by any means universally in Germany, but it certainly is a notable characteristic of intelligent youth in England, France and the United States. To understand why youth is cynical in the West, we must also understand why it is not cynical in the East.

Young men in Russia are not cynical because they accept, on the whole, the Communist philosophy, and they have a great country full of natural resources, ready to be exploited by the help of intelligence. The young have therefore a career before them which they feel to be worth while. You do not have to consider the ends of life when in the course of creating Utopia you are laying a pipeline, building a railway, or teaching peasants to use Ford tractors simultaneously on a four-mile front. Consequently the Russian youth are vigorous and filled with ardent beliefs.

In India the fundamental belief of the earnest young is in the wickedness of England: from this premiss, as from the existence of Descartes, it is possible to deduce a whole philosophy. From the fact that England is Christian, it follows that Hinduism or Mohammedanism, as the case may be, is the only true religion. From the fact that England is capitalistic and industrial, it follows, according to the temperament of the logician concerned, either that everyone ought to spin with a spinning-wheel, or that protective duties ought to be imposed to develop native industrialism and capitalism as the only weapons with which to combat those of the British. From the fact that the British hold India by physical force, it follows that only moral force is admirable. The persecution of nationalist activities in India is just sufficient to make them heroic, and not

sufficient to make them seem futile. In this way the Anglo-Indians save the intelligent youth of India from the blight of cynicism.

In China hatred of England has also played its part, but a much smaller part than in India because the English have never conquered the country. The Chinese youth combine patriotism with genuine enthusiasm for Occidentalism, in the way that was common in Japan fifty years ago. They want the Chinese people to be enlightened, free and prosperous, and they have their work cut out to produce this result. Their ideals are, on the whole, those of the nineteenth century, which in China has not yet begun to seem antiquated. Cynicism in China was associated with the officials of the Imperial regime and survived among the warring militarists who have distracted the country since 1911, but it has no place in the mentality of the modern intellectuals.

In Japan the outlook of young intellectuals is not unlike that which prevailed on the Continent of Europe between 1815 and 1848. The watchwords of Liberalism are still potent; parliamentary government, liberty of the subject, free thought and free speech. The struggle against traditional feudalism and autocracy is quite sufficient to keep young men busy and enthusiastic.

To the sophisticated youth of the West all this ardour seems a trifle crude. He is firmly persuaded that having studied everything impartially, he has seen through everything and found that there is `nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon.' There are, of course, plenty of reasons for this in the teachings of the old. I do not think these go to the root of the matter, for in other circumstances the young react against the teaching of the old and achieve a gospel of their own. If the Occidental youth of the present day react only by cynicism, there must be some special reason for this circumstance. Not only are the young unable to believe what they are told, but they seem also unable to believe anything else. This is a peculiar state of affairs, which deserves investigation. Let us first take some of the old ideals one by one and see why they no longer inspire the old loyalties. We may enumerate among such ideals religion, country, progress, beauty, truth. what is wrong with these in the eyes of the young?

Religion. - The trouble here is partly intellectual, partly social. For intellectual reasons few able men have now the same intensity of religious belief as was possible for, say, St. Thomas Aquinas. The God of most moderns is a little vague, and apt to degenerate into a Life Force or a `power not ourselves that makes for righteousness'. Even believers are concerned much more with the effects of religion in this world than with that other world they profess to believe in; they are not nearly so sure that this world was created for the glory of God as they are that God is a useful hypothesis for improving this world. By subordinating God to the needs of this sublunary life, they cast suspicion upon the genuineness of their faith. They seem to think that God, like the Sabbath, was made for man. There are also sociological reasons for not accepting the Churches as the basis of modern idealism. The Churches, through their endowments, have become bound up with the defense of property. Moreover, they are connected with an oppressive ethic, which condemns many pleasures that to the young appear harmless and inflicts many torments that to the sceptical appear unnecessarily cruel. I have known earnest young men who

accepted wholeheartedly the teaching of Christ; they found themselves in opposition to official Christianity, outcasts and victims of persecution, quite as much as if they had been militant atheists.

Country. - Patriotism has been in many times and places a passionate belief to which the best minds could give full assent. It was so in England in the time of Shakespeare, in Germany in the time of Fichte, in Italy in the time of Mazzini. It is so still in Poland, China, and Outer Mongolia. In the Western nations it is still immensely powerful: it controls politics, public expenditure, military preparations, and so on. But the intelligent youth are unable to accept it as an adequate ideal; they perceive that it is all very well for oppressed nations, but that as soon as an oppressed nation achieves its freedom, the nationalism which was formerly heroic becomes oppressive. The Poles, who had the sympathy of idealists ever since Maria Teresa `wept but took', have used their freedom to organize oppression in Ukrainia. The Irish, upon whom the British had inflicted civilization for eight hundred years, have used their freedom to pass laws preventing the publication of many good books. The spectacle of the Poles murdering Ukrainians and the Irish murdering literature makes nationalism seem a somewhat inadequate ideal even for a small nation. But when it comes to a powerful nation, the argument is even stronger. The Treaty of Versailles was not very encouraging to those who had the luck not to be killed in defending the ideals which their rulers betrayed. Those who during the war averred that they were combating militarism became at its conclusion the leading militarists in their respective countries. Such facts have made it obvious to all intelligent young men that patriotism is the chief curse of our age and will bring civilization to an end if it cannot be mitigated.

Progress. - This is a nineteenth-century ideal which has too much Babbitt about it for the sophisticated youth. Measurable progress is necessarily in unimportant things, such as the number of motor-cars made, or the number of peanuts consumed. The really important things are not measurable and are therefore not suitable for the methods of the booster. Moreover, many modern inventions tend to make people silly. I might instance the radio, the talkies, and poison gas. Shakespeare measured the excellence of an age by its style in poetry (see Sonnet XXXII), but this mode of measurement is out of date.

Beauty. - There is something that sounds old-fashioned about beauty, though it is hard to say why. A modern painter would be indignant if he were accused of seeking beauty. Most artists nowadays appear to be inspired by some kind of rage against the world so that they wish rather to give significant pain than to afford serene satisfaction. Moreover many kinds of beauty require that a man should take himself more seriously than is possible for an intelligent modern. A prominent citizen in a small city State, such as Athens or Florence, could without difficulty feel himself important. The earth was the center of the Universe, man was the purpose of creation, his own city showed man at his best, and he himself was among the best of his own city. In such circumstances Æschylus or Dante could take his own joys or sorrows seriously. He could feel that the emotions of the individual matter, and that tragic occurrences deserve to be celebrated in immortal verse. But the modern man, when misfortune assails him, is conscious of himself as a unit in a statistical total; the past and the future stretch before him in a dreary procession of

trivial defeats. Man himself appears as a somewhat ridiculous strutting animal, shouting and fussing during a brief interlude between infinite silences. `Unacommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal,' says King Lear, and the idea drives him to madness because it is unfamiliar. But to the modern man the idea is familiar and drives him only to triviality.

Truth. - In old days truth was absolute, eternal and superhuman. Myself when young accepted this view and devoted a misspent youth to the search for truth. But a whole host of enemies have arisen to slay truth: pragmatism, behaviorism, psychologism, relativity-physics. Galileo and the Inquisition disagreed as to whether the earth went round the sun or the sun went round the earth. Both agreed in thinking that there was a great difference between these two opinions. The point on which they agreed was the one on which they were both mistaken: the difference is only one of words. In old days it was possible to worship truth; indeed the sincerity of the worship was demonstrated by the practice of human sacrifice. But it is difficult to worship a merely human and relative truth. The law of gravitation, according to Eddington, is only a convenient convention of measurement. It is not truer than other views, any more than the metric system is truer than feet and yards.

Nature and Nature's law lay hid in night;

God said, 'Let Newton be,; and measurement was facilitated.

This sentiment seems lacking in sublimity. When Spinoza believed anything, he considered that he was enjoying the intellectual love of God. The modern man believes with Marx that he is swayed by economic motives, or with Freud that some sexual motive underlies his belief in the exponential theorem or in the distribution of fauna in the Red Sea. In neither case can he enjoy Spinoza's exaltation.

So far we have been considering modern cynicism in a rationalistic manner, as something that has intellectual causes. Belief, however, as modern psychologists never weary of telling us, is seldom determined by rational motives, and the same is true of disbelief, though sceptics often overlook this fact. The causes of any widespread scepticism are likely to be sociological rather than intellectual. The main cause is always comfort without power. The holders of power are not cynical, since they are able to enforce their ideals. Victims of oppression are not cynical, since they are filled with hate, and hate, like any other strong passion, brings with it a train of attendant beliefs. Until the advent of education, democracy, and mass production, intellectuals had everywhere a considerable influence upon the march of affairs, which was by no means diminished if their heads were cut off. The modern intellectual finds himself in a quite different situation. It is by no means difficult for him to obtain a fat job and a good income provided he is willing to sell his services to the stupid rich either as propagandist or as Court jester. The effect of mass production and elementary education is that stupidity is more firmly entrenched than at any other time since the rise of civilization. When the Czarist Government killed Lenin's brother, it did not turn Lenin into a cynic, since hatred inspired a lifelong activity in which he was finally successful. But in the more solid countries of the West there is seldom such potent cause for hatred, or such opportunity for spectacular revenge. The work of intellectuals is ordered and paid for by Governments or rich men, whose aims

probably seem absurd, if not pernicious, to the intellectuals concerned. But a dash of cynicism enables them to adjust their consciences to the situation. There are, it is true, some activities in which wholly admirable work is desired by the powers that be; the chief of these is science, and the next is public architecture in America. But if a man's education has been literary, as is still too often the case, he finds himself at the age of twenty-two with a considerable skill that he cannot exercise in any manner that appear important to himself. Men of science are not cynical even in the West, because they can exercise their best brains with the full approval of the community; but in this they are exceptionally fortunate among modern intellectuals.

If this diagnosis is right, modern cynicism cannot be cured merely by preaching, or by putting better ideals before the young than those that their pastors and masters fish out from the rusty armory of outworn superstitions. The cure will only come when intellectuals can find a career that embodies their creative impulses. I do not see any prescription except the old one advocated by Disraeli: `Educate our masters.' But it will have to be a more real education than is commonly given at the present day to either proletarians or plutocrats, and it will have to be an education taking some account of real cultural values and not only of the utilitarian desire to produce so many goods that nobody have time to enjoy them. A man is not allowed to practise medicine unless he knows something of the human body, but a financier is allowed to operate freely without any knowledge at all of the multifarious effects of his activities, with the sole exception of the effect upon his bank account. How pleasant a world would be in which no man was allowed to operate on the Stock Exchange unless he could pass an examination in economics and Greek poetry, and in which politicians were obliged to have a competent knowledge of history and modern novels! Imagine a magnate confronted with the question: `If you were to make a corner in wheat, what effect would this have upon German poetry?' Causation in the modern world is more complex and remote in its ramifications than it ever was before, owing to the increase in large organizations; but those who control these organizations are ignorant men who do not know the hundredth part of the consequences of their actions. Rabelais published his book anonymously for fear of losing his University post. A modern Rabelais would never write the book, because he would be aware that his anonymity would be penetrated by the perfected methods of publicity. The rulers of the world have always been stupid, but they have not in the past been so powerful as they are now. It is therefore more important than it used to be to find some way of securing that they shall be intelligent. Is this problem insoluble? I do not think so, but I should be the last to maintain that it is easy.

