

The Decay of Business Enterprise

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(Continued from last issue)

The current periodical press, whether ephemeral or other, is a vehicle for advertisements. This is its *raison d'être*, as a business proposition, and this decides the lines of its management without material qualification. Exceptions to the rule are official and minor propagandist periodicals, and, in an uncertain measure, scientific journals. The profits of publication come from the sale of advertising space. The direct returns from sales and subscriptions are now a matter of wholly secondary consequence. Publishers of periodicals, of all grades of transiency, aim to make their product as salable as may be, in order to pass their advertising pages under the eyes of as many readers as may be. The larger the circulation the greater, other things equal, the market value of the advertising space. The highest product of this development is the class of American newspapers called "independent." These in particular—and they are followed at no great interval by the rest—edit all items of news, comment, or gossip with a view to what the news ought to be and what opinions ought to be expressed on passing events.

The first duty of an editor is to gauge the sentiments of his readers, and then tell them what they like to believe. By this means he maintains or increases the circulation. His second duty is to see that nothing is said in the news items or editorials which may discountenance any claims or announcements made by his advertisers, discredit their standing or good faith, or expose any weakness or deception in any business venture that is or may become a valuable advertiser. By this means he increases the advertising value of his circulation. The net result is that both the news columns and the editorial columns are commonly meretricious in a high degree.

Systematic insincerity on the part of the ostensible purveyors of information and leaders of opinion may be deplored by persons who stickle for truth and pin their hopes of social salvation on the spread of accurate information. But the ulterior cultural effect of the insincerity which is in this way required by the business situation may, of course, as well be salutary as the reverse. Indeed, the effect is quite as likely to be salutary, if "salutary" be taken to mean favorable to the maintenance of the established order, since the insincerity is guided by a wish to avoid any lesion of the received preconceptions and prejudices. The insincerity of the newspapers and magazines seems, on the whole, to be of a conservative trend.

The periodical press is not only a purveyor of news, opinions, and admonitions; it also supplies the greater part of the literature currently read. And in this part of its work the same underlying business principles are in force. The endeavor is to increase the circulation at any cost that will result in an increased net return from the sale of the advertising space. The literary output of the magazines is of use for carrying the advertising pages, and as a matter of business, as seen from the standpoint of the business man's interest, that is its only use.

The standards of excellence that govern this periodical literature seem fairly to be formulated as follows: (1) In each given case it must conform to the tastes and the most ready comprehension of the social strata which the particular periodical is designed to reach; (2) it should conduce to a quickened interest in the various lines of services and commodities offered in the advertising pages, and should direct the attention of readers along such lines of investment and expenditure as may benefit the large advertisers particularly. At least it must in no way hamper the purposes of the advertisers. Nothing should go in a popular magazine which would cast a sinister shadow over any form of busi-

ness venture that advertises or might be induced to advertise.

Taken in the aggregate, the literary output is designed to meet the tastes of that large body of people who are in the habit of buying freely. The successful magazine writers are those who follow the taste of the class to whom they speak, in any aberration (fad, mannerism, or misapprehension) and in any shortcoming of insight or force which may beset that class. They must also conform to the fancies and prejudices of this class as regards the ideals—artistic, moral, religious, or social—for which they speak. The class to which the successful periodicals turn, and which gives tone to periodical literature, is that great body of people who are in moderately easy circumstances. Culturally this means the respectable middle class (largely the dependent business class) of various shades of conservatism, affectation, and snobbery.

On the whole, the literature provided in this way and to this end seems to run on a line of slightly more pronounced conservatism and affectation than the average sentiment of the readers appealed to. This is true for the following reason. Readers who are less conservative and less patient of affectations, snobbery, and illiberality than the average are in a position of doubters and dissentients. They are less confident in their convictions of what is right and good in all matters, and are also not unwilling to make condescending allowances for those who are less "advanced," and who must be humored since they know no better; whereas those who rest undoubting in the more conservative views and a more intolerant affectation of gentility are readier, because more naive, in their rejection of whatever does not fully conform to their habits of thought.

So it comes about that the periodical literature is, on the whole, somewhat more scrupulously devout in tone, somewhat more given to laud and dilate upon the traffic of the upper leisure class and to carry on the discussion in the terms and tone imputed to that class, somewhat more prone to speak deprecatingly of the vulgar innovations of modern culture, than the average of the readers to whom it is addressed. The trend of its teaching, therefore, is, on the whole, conservative and conciliatory. It is also under the necessity of adapting itself to a moderately low average of intelligence and information; since on this head, again, it is those who possess intelligence and information that are readiest to make allowances; they are, indeed, mildly flattered to do so, besides being the only ones who can. It is a prime requisite to conciliate a large body of readers.

This latter characteristic is particularly evident in the didactic portion of the periodical literature. This didactic literature, running on discussions of a quasi-artistic and quasi-scientific character, is, by force of the business exigencies of the case, designed to favor the sensibilities of the weaker among its readers by adroitly suggesting that the readers are already possessed of the substance of what purports to be taught and need only be fortified with certain general results. There follows a great spread of quasi-technical terms and fanciful conceits. The sophisticated animal stories and the half-mythical narratives of industrial processes which now have the vogue illustrate the results achieved in this direction.

The literary output issued under the surveillance of the advertising office is excellent in workmanship and deficient in intelligence and substantial originality. What is encouraged and cultivated is adroitness of style and a piquant presentation of commonplaces. Harmlessness, not to say pointlessness, and an edifying, gossiping optimism are the substantial characteristics, which persist through all ephemeral mutations of style, manner, and subject-matter.

Business enterprise, therefore, it is believed, gives a salutary bent to periodical literature. It conduces mildly to the maintenance of archaic ideals and philistine affectations, and inculcates the crasser forms of patriotic, sportsmanlike, and spendthrift aspirations.

The largest and most promising factor of cultural discipline—most promising as a corrective of iconoclastic vagaries—over which business principles rule is national politics. The purposes and the material effects of business politics have already been spoken of above, but in the present connection their incidental, disciplinary effects are no less important. Business interests urge an aggressive national policy and business men direct it. Such a policy is warlike as well as patriotic. The direct cultural value of a warlike business policy is unequivocal. It makes for a conservative animus on the part of the populace. During war time, and within the military organization at all times, under martial law, civil rights are in abeyance; and the more warfare and armament the more abeyance. Military training is a training in ceremonial precedence, arbitrary command, and unquestioning obedience. A military organization is essentially a servile organization. Insubordination is the deadly sin. The more consistent and the more comprehensive this military training, the more effectually will the members of the community be trained into habits of subordination and away from that growing propensity to make light of personal authority that is the chief infirmity of democracy. This applies first and most decidedly, of course, to the soldiery, but it applies only in a less degree to the rest of the population. They learn to think in warlike terms of rank, authority, and subordination, and so grow progressively more patient of encroachments upon their civil rights. Witness the change that has latterly been going on in the temper of the German people.

The modern warlike policies are entered upon for the sake of peace, with a view to the orderly pursuit of business. In their initial motive they differ from the warlike dynastic politics of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. But the disciplinary effects of warlike pursuits and the warlike preoccupations are much the same whatever may be their initial motive or ulterior aim. The end sought in the one case was warlike mastery and high repute in the matter of ceremonial precedence; in the other, the modern case, it is pecuniary mastery and high repute in the matter of commercial solvency. But in both cases alike the pomp and circumstance of war and armaments, and the sensational appeals to patriotic pride and animosity made by victories, defeats, or comparisons of military and naval strength, act to rehabilitate lost ideals and weakened convictions of the chauvinistic or dynastic order. At the same stroke they direct the popular interest to other, nobler, institutionally less hazardous matters than the unequal distribution of wealth or of creature comforts. Warlike and patriotic preoccupations fortify the barbarian virtues of subordination and prescriptive authority. Habituation to a warlike, predatory scheme of life is the strongest disciplinary factor that can be brought to counteract the vulgarization of modern life wrought by peaceful industry and the machine process, and to rehabilitate the decaying sense of status and differential dignity. Warfare, with the stress on subordination and mastery and the insistence on gradations of dignity and honor incident to a militant organization, has always proved an effective school in barbarian methods of thought.

In this direction, evidently, lies the hope of a corrective for "social unrest" and similar disorders of civilized life. There can, indeed, be no serious question but that a consistent return to the ancient

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