

## COUNTERFEIT CONSENSUS

By M. J. Sobran

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*Mr. Sobran delivered this presentation at Hillsdale during the Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar on "The Humane Holocaust: The Auschwitz Formula."*

Last week a strange thing happened. We had an earthquake in New York and New Jersey and nobody knew it. We were told about it by the radio, which presumably had been informed of it by the relevant experts. I say "presumably": we trust our radio announcers even when we don't know their names. Radios don't lie.

I don't doubt there was a detectible geological shift. I even heard a man say a friend of his had felt his desk move slightly. But the use of the word "earthquake," which brings to mind buildings crashing down and the earth splitting to swallow people up, created a great retroactive excitement. We had been through an earthquake and lived to tell about it! You might say it was an *ex post facto* earthquake. Such is the power of words deployed by accredited experts.

This was front-page news. It would not have been if a less sensational word had been used to refer to the same event.

You may recall the passage in which Dr. Watson is astonished to find that Sherlock Holmes has never



heard of the Copernican theory. "Now that I do know it," says Holmes, "I shall do my best to forget it." He explains that the mind is like an attic, which must not be cluttered with useless things. And to him, the Copernican theory is a useless thing: "What the deuce is it to me? You say that we go round the sun. If we went round the moon it would not make a pennyworth of difference to me or to my work."

I find that wonderfully refreshing. No doubt good arguments could be brought against the Holmesian position. But the point here is that those arguments don't occur to Watson. He has heard of Copernicus and his theory, but it is safe to say he couldn't defend or justify that theory. His cosmology is inherited. He fancies himself an educated man, an initiate of science, because he has given a merely passive assent to the Copernican theory while knowing less about these

im•pri•mis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin in primis, among the first (things). . .

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matters than Ptolemy must have known. That hardly qualifies as scientific knowledge. Science has come to Watson pre-packaged, in the form of a report. Believing reports of that kind no more makes you a scientific thinker than agreeing with the conclusion of a syllogism makes you a logician. If the Copernican theory is true—I can't myself vouch for it—most of us accept it as uncritically as a savage accepts his tribal superstitions. In that sense we *are* savages, thinking not individual thoughts but repeating formulae we have had imposed on us.

Holmes is utterly unabashed by his ignorance. And he is at least superior to Watson in having criteria of relevance: "What the deuce is it to me?" Aristotle tells us that all men by nature desire to know, but Holmes has no truck with what Alfred North Whitehead calls "inert knowledge." Watson is the eternal straight man, utterly conventional. Holmes, on the other hand, knows what he knows; he knows it firsthand; and he knows how and why he knows it. He may be wrong on the present question, but Watson is right only by accident. Holmes has a mind, and he has followed Dr. Johnson's advice to clear it of cant. This naturally alarms Watson. He feels obliged to report it to us. He is quite unconscious of having revealed to us his inferiority to Holmes. He thinks he is merely telling us of Holmes' eccentricity.

This brings us to a problem of modern education that has been noticed, so far as I know, only by Albert Jay Nock. Nock was almost uniquely gloomy about the prospect of universal education. In fact he insisted that it was a misnomer, since only a very few men were in his judgment truly educable. The rest could be trained for competent performance in trades and certain professions, but he distinguished sharply between practical training and education, or cultivation of the intellect.

It was not just that the attempt to educate everybody would be futile and wasteful; Nock held that it would actually backfire, to the detriment of real education. I know Nock's philosophy could be called elitist; and though that in itself doesn't prove it false, my point is not that it is true. Only that Nock had an insight that is worth our consideration.

Nock thought that the result of universal literacy would be to instill in the masses a skill they would not know how to use wisely. They would learn to read without learning to think. They would consequently fall prey to the bogus authority of sheer printed matter. We have all heard the challenging skeptical question, "Do you believe everything you read?" A great many of us believe nearly everything we read. We assume that it wouldn't be printed if it weren't true, never mind who printed it or how he knew. The medium of print has made us subject to huge masses of material we lack time and competence to evaluate with any rigor.

Note that Nock was not contemptuous of the average person's intelligence. He thought it was sound enough within the area of its immediate experience, but that to expose it to printed matter would be to put it to an unfair test. It would lead to intellectual passivity, a docile acceptance of advertising and propaganda. This in turn would stimulate even more such manipulative forms of literature, with the consequence that the whole intellectual tone of our society would be lowered.

We do have a strange faith in literacy. But Germany in the Hitler era was the most literate nation in the world. Many of the Communist nations have nearly wiped out illiteracy even as they have nearly wiped out independent thought. Yet our educationists return from Communist China burling about that nation's "achievement" in teaching most of its citizens to read.

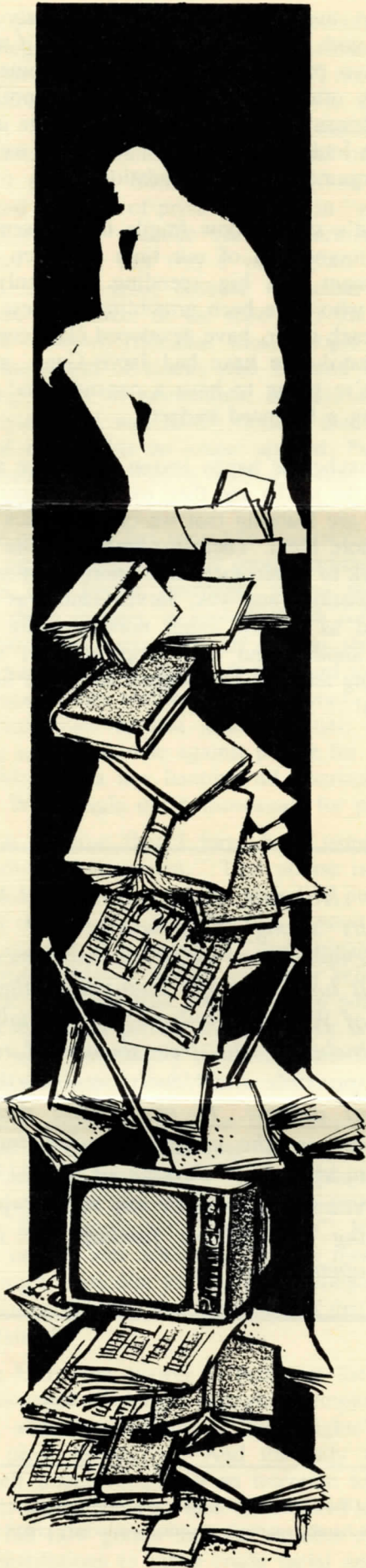
Let us be very clear about it. The ability to read no more implies the ability to think than knowing the Morse Code implies a mastery of logic.

Lenin was clear about it. He said frankly that the whole and sole purpose of teaching the Russian peasants to read was to enable them to read party directives. He said with equal candor that the last thing he wanted was to create a new intelligentsia. To him print was valuable merely as an instrument of stimulation.

We may recall too that Plato was skeptical even of writing. He did not oppose it, of course; he did however contend that it could approximate knowledge only as a kind of shadow of the real thing—a shadow the ignorant and malicious might take for the thing itself. For Plato knowledge is inseparable from wisdom, and wisdom is more easily generated in live conversation than on paper. Conversation at its best is the direct encounter of two minds. Writing can be a valuable supplement to this, but not a substitute for it. That, as John Henry Newman reminds us, is why we actually go to colleges and universities instead of just staying home and reading a stack of books.

Now the masses of printed matter and information are intimidating. To be literate is almost necessarily to feel terribly behind in your reading. When we say "literate," we mean in fact two things: one is the mere ability to read, even if your lips move in the act of doing it; the other is a matter of having read certain things. Mark Twain defined a classic as a book nobody wants to read but everybody wants to have read. We feel we ought to have read and digested a certain amount, that there is a certain core of literature it behooves you to have under your belt, that there are certain things you ought to know. Few of us can have Sherlock Holmes' ruthlessness and shamelessness about these things. Even if we don't pretend to know more than we do, we don't want to seem more ignorant than the next fellow.





Most people over the last few generations have had better educational opportunities than their parents had. They have been upwardly mobile and self-conscious about their origins. This too has made them docile in intellectual matters. Where we feel our inadequacy, we tend to either keep quiet or repeat what others say rather than risk exposing a personal shortage of brains and knowledge. We are supposed to be "educated," and so we want at least to appear to be living up to the role of Informed Citizen. And the easiest way to do that is to imitate what sounds like authoritative opinion.

This has led to the rise of a new thing: Public Opinion. The usual assumption is that everybody has his own ideas about things, and when you add them all up and average them out you get a kind of mean, which is Public Opinion. But this is not the case. Because we are expected to have informed opinions on all kinds of things beyond our ken, we fall back, unless we are careful, on the cliché and the familiar formula. Public Opinion is therefore not thought but verbal behavior, intensely imitative. Public Opinion is not rightly understood as what people think: it is, rather, what people think other people think.

That is why we speak of opinion-leaders and opinion-makers, phrases that would make no sense if each of us made up his own mind. The formulas I mentioned at the beginning of my talk—the "earthquake" and the Copernican theory—are bits of Public Opinion. They are not necessarily false; but they are held by far more people than could possibly have confirmed them independently.

I hope you don't think I am striking an aristocratic pose and sneering an insinuation that there are only a few of us honest-to-goodness independent minds. Man, I devoutly believe, is a rational animal. But in our time the circuits of reason are overloaded, and, forced to make judgments about cosmic matters, the mind typically flashes out in cliché and turns off. I do it. You do it. It takes discipline and vigilance to avoid doing it.

The trouble is that we do it without knowing we do it. As George Orwell points out, it is so terribly easy for the mind to relax and let the prefabricated phrases pour forth from the lips. We are all in Orwell's debt. Few writers have done so much to help us cope with the advent of totalitarianism. And one of the things on which he put great and intelligent emphasis was the moral and political meaning of cliché. Those who seek unlimited power over us have an interest in corrupting the language, and especially in substituting ready-made verbal constructions for more immediate and vivid and even colloquial phrases. Thus "liquidating undesirable elements" was Communist jargon for killing the enemies of Communism; the forced evacuations of thousands of peasants from their homes with



no more than they could carry is termed "relocation of population." In each case the function of the phrase is to prevent us from visualizing the act that is being committed. By such means the grisliest of atrocities can be disguised by abstract and even humanitarian rhetoric. Hitler called his crowning project the "final solution," the implication of which was of course that Jews were no more than a "problem."

No totalitarian regime can exist without control of the mass media. This is no less vital than the control of weapons and modes of production and transportation. The totalitarian does not merely seek a marginal power to censor when otherwise independent media get out of control; that is small potatoes, the practice (and a rather inefficient one) of old-fashioned despotism, which aims only at suppressing political enemies and largely leaves other things alone. What distinguishes the totalitarian is the drive to commandeer the media and to use them as instruments of steering the consciousness of his subjects. He aims to control what they know and even what they want. He wants to be the one who gives meaning to their lives. The corruption of language is part, and an indispensable part, of his program. Ideally, his subjects will entertain no thought he has not authorized, and their speech will be constituted by phrases he himself has disseminated. As Stephen Tonsor has put it, the destruction of nuance is a regular feature of totalitarianism. Or, to put it another way, the totalitarian regime aims to reduce all language to the condition of cliché.

Even in free societies independent thought is hard. It takes intellectual discipline and a readiness to resist social pressure. That pressure is seldom overt; usually it takes the form of prepackaged thoughts and what are called "buzzwords," those overused terms that set the tone and subtly tell us what kind of company we are in. Ostensibly neutral terms like "social justice," which can be variously defined, are usually a strong clue to the actual political commitment of whoever uses them. Sometimes the pat phrase signals mere exhaustion; we say we are feeling "fit as a fiddle" when no fresher way of putting it occurs to us. But sometimes clichés, and especially political clichés are gestures of solidarity with a certain class of people. When educated people toss around words like "racist" and "sexist," they are signalling their affinity with certain contemporary movements. They are implicitly asking their auditors to accept conceptual package-deals which assume rather a lot about the status of "women and minorities." To repeat their clichés is to submit to their view of things, whether we intend to or not.

The semantic aggressions of the Left have not received the attention they deserve, and so our public discourse has suffered from a good deal of intellectual smuggling. When President Carter calls the Vietnam war a "racist war," one wonders if he knows what he

is saying. I suspect that like many moderately educated Southerners he is struggling to erase the "shame" of Southernness by striking a "liberal" posture, and making a verbal gesture that is more important than whatever literal content it may have. And I suspect that his brother Billy's deliberate crudeness is a kind of defiant retort to the President's attempt to achieve a Yankee urbanity at the price of personal sincerity and local color. By using liberal clichés, the President strives to ingratiate himself with liberal forces, who continue to regard him with misgivings and even to rebuff him.

And by using old-fashioned vulgarity, Billy Carter offers a kind of rebuke, the kind we have already seen Sherlock Holmes inflict on Dr. Watson. To use other people's words is a kind of surrender of character, an abdication of the duty to see, think, and feel for oneself. I don't particularly mean to take sides; just to point out the kind of function that can be served by the choice of one set of terms rather than another. Words mean far more than just the objects they refer to.

This principle is behind many of the corruptions of our public language. The Reverend Jim Jones was able, by an adroitness in handling the liberal dialect, to delude many people into thinking him a humanitarian social reformer. Communist rhetoric has likewise enlisted a good deal of well-meaning Western support and weakened the Western will to resist; Communist cant about "the people" and "liberation" and so forth—the vocabulary is extensive—has not only justified atrocities at home, but has also disguised them from the world. Like advertising jargon, it serves a vital public relations function. It convinces the gullible that Stalin, Mao, Castro, Ho, and Mugabe are ultimately on the side of the angels. Note that this is true even when there is no doubt that bloody purges and acts of terrorism are committed. Though it may not conceal those acts, it implies that they are a necessary, purposeful, and minor part of a larger humanitarian program.

It is getting harder and harder to be "neutral." Tendentious language keeps creeping in. Liberal dominance of public opinion has put conservative sentiment sharply on the defensive. Even conscientious reporters who are trying to be fair unconsciously reflect the pressures of our counterfeit consensus. Opponents of abortion are referred to not as right-to-life forces, but as "so-called" right-to-life forces, as if advocacy of the fetus' right to live were somehow dubious and doctrinaire.

That would be understandable, perhaps, if groups like the NAACP were similarly referred to as "so-called" civil rights organizations, or homosexual groups were referred to as "so-called" gay rights forces. But they are not. Ironically, these groups have won an undeserved acceptance on their own terms.



The phrase "civil rights" is particularly misleading. The Negro movement was once a genuine civil rights movement. The phrase "civil rights" means, after all, limitations on the state's power over the individual citizen. The movement began as a legitimate attempt to destroy government-imposed racial inferiority. But then it switched from public to private targets, and attacked the right of private citizens in "public accommodations" to practice racial discrimination. Now whether or not this was a valid goal, it was not a "civil rights" goal, because its actual aim was to increase the power of the state over the decisions of private citizens. Because most people sympathized with the plight of blacks who suffered cruel and degrading snubs in restaurants, motels, and places of employment, it was hardly noticed that the terminology of civil rights no longer applied. Public Opinion continued calling Negro interest groups "civil rights organizations."

The confusion has spread to "women's rights" and "gay rights," each interest group seeking special protection and finally privilege. If we think critically about these matters, as we are much out of the habit of doing, we realize that all citizens should, as citizens, have the same rights. It is absurd to suppose that homosexuals are entitled to special ones. If it is wrong to discriminate against a homosexual, it is equally wrong to discriminate against people for any peculiarity. Why not a law banning all discrimination whatever? Why single out homosexuals for protection?

Now observe that I have been using the phrase "discrimination against." That phrase is now an uncontested component of the jargon of public opinion. But if we use it in an unfamiliar context its weaknesses stand out. Is it wrong to "discriminate against" an antisemite? May a Jewish employer refuse to hire a man he knows to hate Jews? Why or why not? Is not this a matter for private discretion? Or is it a question likely to be reasonably decided by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare?

Much might be said on this subject, but I will content myself with pointing out one consequence of the confusion over "civil rights." In general we are agreed that the law should apply to actions, not motives. But the recent "civil rights" legislation has made certain acts which are licit in themselves—like rejecting a particular job applicant—illegal by virtue of the motive behind them. And how is that motive to be ascertained?

We know the answer to that one: the presumption of innocence no longer applies to employers, universities, and other subjects of "civil rights" laws. They must clear themselves. And the only way to clear yourself unequivocally of an intention to discriminate against someone is to hire him. The Federal government has now gotten into the business of forcing private institutions to make crude racial and sexual dis-

criminations, also known as "quotas." The drive for civil rights has eventuated in massive assaults on freedom, privacy, and civility. The nation as a whole, or any part of it the Federal government flatters with its attentions, stands accused, of racism and sexism. We have become a nation of defendants.

Public Opinion has turned honest discussions of real issues into crude compassion contests. We are all guilty, unless we perform the expiatory rituals, of participation in great historic evils. The Federal government has adopted the accusatory posture of trendy liberalism. It is an insult to free men. I don't need to spell that out to the Hillsdale community, which has proudly refused to fall to its knees before Joseph Califano.

Lest you think I exaggerate the intellectual and moral dissipation of the high priests of liberal opinion, let me quote an authoritative source. As you may know, Sears Roebuck & Co. is suing the Federal government to demand coherence in what are called "guidelines," and refusing to comply therewith until those guidelines are rendered coherent. This has elicited a stern editorial from the *New York Times*—all *Times* editorials are stern, save those dealing with the Soviet Union—asking rhetorically whether Sears, after all, didn't play its part in the "inequities of the past?" I am under the impression that the burden of proof is on the prosecutor's team in these matters. I know of no reason why the *Times* can't maintain stricter standards of justice than the Federal government. I am also under the impression that the Constitution forbids *ex post facto* laws. Even if Sears did practice race discrimination before there were laws against it, the government has no right to punish it for that. But the *Times* was not through yet. It provided us with a self-revelation that should be framed and put on the wall of everyone who still treasures his freedom. It said: "A nation that fostered slavery and held women back may never completely cleanse itself of guilt."

When it comes to abortion, the *Times* has insisted that we should separate our theology from our politics. Yet here we have an assertion of an undefined and inexpiable guilt in which all of us are involved. I hardly need remind you who will be assuming the mission of guiding us back into the state of grace. You are already too familiar with the instruments of Federally-sponsored grace.

The mass media have done a remarkable job of convincing the nation that its traditions are polluted and that the indicated cleanser is state power. When matters come to a vote, we usually find, somewhat to our surprise, that popular sentiment is sharply to the right of "public opinion." The reason it is a surprise is that we are haunted by the accusatory liberal mentality. We have gotten into the habit of being timid and defensive about our motives; we have accepted the strenuous duty of endlessly justifying ourselves to our



defamers. The media have become Big Brother's ally in the private sector. As a nation we are fairly conservative, but a little ashamed of it. It has been made to seem somehow unenlightened, like not knowing about the Copernican theory. We always expect the other fellow to be a liberal, and we are anxious lest he think we are racist, sexist, heightist, whatever. The strategy of accusation has proved a very effective one for manipulating us. It is high time we spoke out vociferously against it and insisted that the burden of proof is on the government, not on the governed.

The special vice of the media is that they create a "false consciousness." We may know what they say about things we are familiar with is unreliable, but we think they must be reliable about other things. Or we may know that they are generally misleading, but think it is futile to say so. They do not "reflect" Public Opinion; they *are* Public Opinion. They tell us what to think everyone else thinks; and because so much of our speech and even thought is imitative behavior, we decide not to swim upstream. That is why Public Opinion is so far left of what ordinary people really do think when left to themselves: Public Opinion is dominated by the aggressive. They have put us all, rhetorically speaking, on the defensive.

In the same way, the Counterfeit Consensus func-

tions to make you feel like the "only one" who differs with its phantom majority. Or, if not the only one, then part of a benighted and doomed minority. So very often we give up a possible position in advance because there seems no percentage in holding it or even looking into it. Ayn Rand has well described the "argument from intimidation."

Yet it's strange how fragile this consensus is. The whole momentum of our time has been toward big government and big spending. Suddenly all those people who have been grumbling all these years have found each other, have developed class consciousness, and presto!—we have had Jarvis-Gann, and it looks like we're going to have a constitutional amendment requiring a balanced budget.

So maybe the happy lesson is that we are learning to take the media and their experts and prophets lightly. We are learning that we can talk back to them or just ignore them. That also means we are learning to talk back to government and ignore the morbid politics of accusation (and yes, Jarvis-Gann was widely denounced as "racist"—but nobody really cared). To put it another and more hopeful way, we may be becoming less like Dr. Watson and more like Sherlock Holmes!



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