

Critical Societies: Thoughts from the Past

Critical Thinking, the Educated Mind, and the Creation of Critical Societies...

Thoughts from the Past

Commentary by Linda Elder and Rush Cosgrove

The critical habit of thought, if usual in society, will pervade all its mores, because it is a way of taking up the problems of life. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded by stump orators ... They are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence, uninfluenced by the emphasis or confidence with which assertions are made on one side or the other. They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices and all kinds of cajolery. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens.

-William Graham Sumner, 1906

Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.

-Leo Tolstoy

A critical society is a community of people who value critical thinking and value those who practice it. It is a society continually improving. Its most distinguishing characteristic is its emphasis on thinking as the key to the emancipation of the mind, to the creation of just practices, to the preservation and development of the species.

Unfortunately, there are no critical societies in the world. Nor have there ever been. The idea represents an ideal not yet achieved, a possibility not yet actualized. There is no culture on earth where critical thought is characteristic of everyday personal and social life.

On the contrary, the world is filled with superficiality, prejudice, bias, distortions, lies, deception, manipulation, short sightedness, close-mindedness, righteousness, hypocrisy, on and on, in every culture in every country throughout the world. These

problems in thinking lead to untold negative implications - fear, anxiety, sadness, hopelessness, pain, suffering, injustices of every imaginable kind.

Yet humans have great capacity for rationality and reasonability. The history of human accomplishments, achievements and contributions well documents this fact. But for the most part this capacity must be developed, actively, by the mind. It is our second, not our first, nature.

What is more natural to the mind, what comes first in terms of human tendencies, and often takes precedence, is an orientation focused on self-gratification, self-interest, self-protection. This perspective is innate, and many would say, necessary for survival. Still it leads to many problems and ultimately stands as a barrier to the development of fairminded critical societies.

To envision a critical society, imagine a world in which problems are routinely solved through reasoning based on openmindedness and mutual respect, rather than vested interest and power. Imagine a world which protects maximum freedoms and liberties, a world free from hunger and homelessness, a world in which people work to understand the viewpoints of others, especially those with whom they disagree. Imagine a world in which people are encouraged to think for themselves, rather than mindlessly conform.

There has never been a more important time in history to foster and develop critical societies. With the dwindling of the earth's resources, with vast declines in natural habitats, with impending extinctions of growing numbers of animals, with the melting of arctic ice, with wars and hunger and hopelessness on the part of so many, with all of the monumental problems we now face, it is vital that we turn things around and get them right. Whether and the extent to which we do will directly depend on our ability to solve the complex problems before us, to follow out the implications of our actions, to develop and use our collective intelligence in doing so.

To fix the problems looming before us, there is one thing we must get command of – our thinking. Everything we do is determined by some thinking we do. Critical societies can and will emerge only to the extent that human thinking becomes a primary interest of people living in societies, only to the extent that thinking comes to be understood as a complex phenomenon routinely highlighted and discussed and critiqued in every relationship, in every family, in every business, in every organization, in every field and discipline, in every part of the culture. In short, because the human mind is naturally riddled with problems, the creation of critical societies depends upon people within the societies taking thinking seriously, studying its problems, its tricks and stratagems, its weaknesses and strengths, its native tendencies, its rational capacities.

Many important thinkers throughout history have contributed to the idea of the critical society through emphasis on the educated mind, freedom of thought, the cultivation of the intellect, and barriers to human development. We have pulled together some quotes from these thinkers for you here, and provided some little commentary in places. When we weave these ideas together with similar ideas from other great thinkers, a rich

tapestry emerges, a vibrant guiding concept of the critical society. We see what we are reaching for, and the traps to be avoided.

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill, an important 19th century Utilitarian, concerned to help create a critical society, feared conformism among the masses, what he saw as sheep-like uniformity which imposed narrow parochial views and arbitrary rules on those more enlightened. On Mill's view, a critical society would necessarily entail freedom of thought and the granting of fundamental human rights. In speaking of human freedom, in his classic essay entitled *On Liberty*, Mill says:

[The appropriate region of human liberty] comprises, first, the inward domain of consciousness; demanding liberty of conscience in the most comprehensive sense; liberty of thought and feeling; absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical or speculative, scientific, moral, or theological. The liberty of expressing and publishing opinions...is practically inseparable from it. Second, the principle requires liberty of tastes and pursuits; of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character; of doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow; without impediment from our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong...No society in which these liberties are not, on the whole respected, is free, whatever may be its form of government; and none is completely free in which they do not exist absolute and unqualified. The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it (p. 50).



There is also in the world at large an increasing inclination to stretch unduly the powers of society over the individual, both by the forces of opinion and even by that of legislation; and as the tendency of all the changes taking place in the world is to strengthen society, and diminish the power of the individual, this encroachment is not only of the evils which tend spontaneously to disappear, but, on the contrary to grow more and more formidable. The disposition of mankind, whether as rulers or as fellow-citizens, to impose their own opinions and inclinations as a rule of conduct on others, is so energetically supported by some of the best and by some of the worst feelings

incident to human nature, that it is hardly ever kept under restraint by anyone but want of power; and as the power is not declining, but growing, unless a strong barrier of moral conviction can be raised against the mischief, we must expect, in the present circumstances of the world, to see it increase (pp. 51-52)

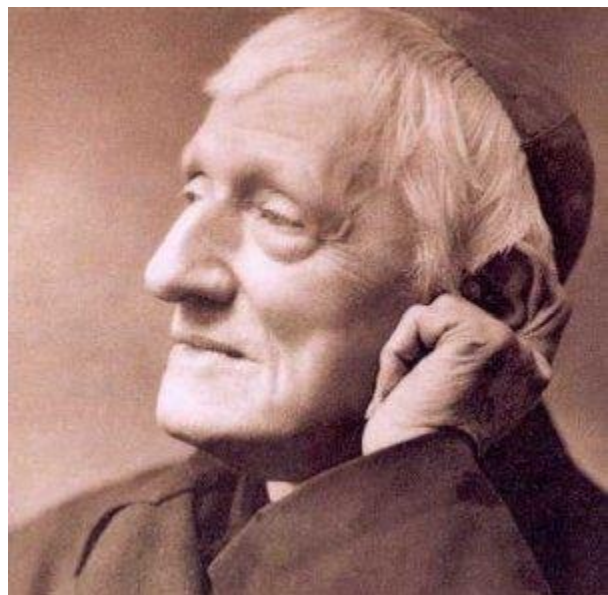
If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind...the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error (p. 53).

We can never be sure that the opinion we are endeavoring to stifle is a false opinion; and if we were sure, stifling it would be an evil still. First: the opinion which it is attempted to suppress by authority may possibly be true. Those who desire to suppress it, of course, deny its truth; but they are not infallible. They have no authority to decide the question for all mankind, and exclude every other person from the means of judging. To refuse a hearing to an opinion, because they are sure it is false, is assuming that their certainty is the same thing as absolute certainty. All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility...on any matter not self-evident, there are ninety-nine persons incapable of judging of it for one who is capable; and the capacity of the hundredth person is only comparative; for the majority of the eminent men of every past generation held many opinions now known to be erroneous, and did or approved numerous things which no one will now justify. (p. 54-56).

John Henry Newman

To create a critical society, we must foster educated minds. In 1851, John Henry Newman wrote his famous set of lectures, *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, which in 1852 became *The Idea of a University*. Consider his conception of the educated person, found in these lectures:

Truth, of whatever kind, is the proper object of the intellect; its cultivation then lies in fitting it to apprehend and contemplate truth... the intellect in its present state, ...does not discern truth intuitively, or as a whole. We know, not by a direct and simple vision,



not at a glance, but, as it were, by piecemeal and accumulation, by a mental process, by going round an object, by the comparison, the combination, the mutual correction, the continual adaptation, of many partial notions, by the employment, concentration, and joint action of many faculties and exercises of mind. Such a union and concert of the intellectual powers, such an enlargement and development, such a comprehensiveness, is necessarily a matter of training. And again, such a training is a matter of rule; it is not *mere application*, however exemplary, which introduces the mind to truth, nor the reading of many books, nor the getting up of many subjects, nor the witnessing many experiments, nor attending many lectures. All this is short of enough; a man may have done it all, yet be lingering in the vestibule of knowledge: he may not realize what his mouth utters; he may not see with his mental eye what confronts him; he may have no grasp of things as they are; or at least he may have no power at all of advancing one step forward of himself, in consequence of what he has already acquired, no power of discriminating between truth and falsehood, of sifting out the grains of truth from the mass, of arranging things according to their real value. Such a power is an acquired faculty of judgment, of clear-sightedness, of sagacity, of wisdom, ...and of intellectual self-possession and repose - qualities which do not come of mere acquirement. The eye of the mind, of which the object is truth, is the work of discipline and habit (p. 109).

I will tell you, Gentlemen, what has been the practical error of the last twenty years – not to load the memory of the student with a mass of undigested knowledge, but to force upon him so much that he has rejected all. It has been the error of distracting and enfeebling the mind by an unmeaning profusion of subjects; of implying that a smattering in a dozen branches of study is not shallowness, which it really is, but enlargement, which it is not; of considering an acquaintance with the learned names of things and persons, and the possession of the clever duodecimos, and attendance on eloquent lecturers, and membership with scientific institutions, and the sight of the experiments of a platform and the specimens of a museum, that all this was not dissipation of mind, but progress. All things now are to be learned at once, not first one thing and then the other, not one well, but many badly. Learning is to be without exertion, without attention, without toil; without grounding, without advance, without finishing. There is to be nothing individual in it; and this, forsooth, is the wonder of the age. What the steam engine does with matter, the printing press is to do with the mind; it is to act mechanically, and the population is to be passively, almost unconsciously enlightened (p. 103).

I protest to you, Gentlemen, that if I had to choose between a so-called University, which dispensed with residence and tutorial superintendence, and gave its degrees to any person who passed an examination in a wide range of subjects, and a University which had no professors or examinations at all, but merely brought a number of young men together for three or four years, and then sent them away as the University of Oxford is said to have done some sixty years since, if I were asked which of these two methods was the better discipline of the intellect...if I must determine which of the two courses was the more successful in training, moulding, enlarging the mind, which sent out men the more fitted for their secular duties, which produced better public men, men

of the world, men whose names would descend to posterity, I have no hesitation in giving the preference to that University which did nothing, over that which exacted of its members an acquaintance with every science under the sun. (p. 105).

All I say is, call things by their right names, and do not confuse together ideas which are essentially different. A thorough knowledge of one science and a superficial acquaintance with many, are not the same thing; a smattering of a hundred things or a memory for detail, is not a philosophical or comprehensive view. Recreations are not education; accomplishments are not education. Do not say, the people must be educated, when, after all, you only mean, amused, refreshed, soothed, put into good spirits and good humour, or kept from vicious excesses. I do not say that such amusements, such occupations of mind, are not a great gain; but they are not education. You may as well call drawing and fencing education, as a general knowledge of botany or conchology.

Stuffing birds or playing stringed instruments is an elegant pastime, and a resource to the idle, but it is not education; it does not form or cultivate the intellect (p. 104).

Education is a high word; it is the preparation for knowledge, and it is the imparting of knowledge in proportion to that preparation. We require intellectual eyes to know withal, as bodily eyes for sight. We need both objects and organs intellectual; we cannot gain them without setting about it; we cannot gain them in our sleep, or by hap-hazard (p. 104).

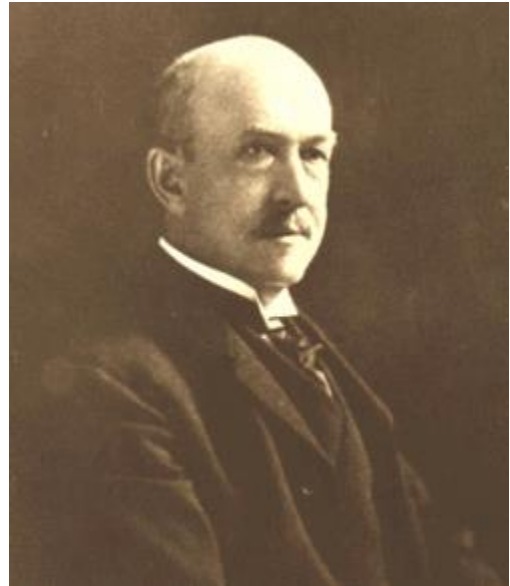
...the intellect, which has been disciplined to the perfection of its powers, which knows, and thinks while it knows, which has learned to leaven the dense mass of facts and events with the elastic force of reason, such an intellect cannot be partial, cannot be exclusive, cannot be impetuous, cannot be at a loss, cannot but be patient, collected and majestically calm, because it discerns the end in every beginning, the origin in every end, the law in every interruption, the limit in each delay; because it ever knows where it stands, and how its path lies from one point to another (p. 100).

It is education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. It shows him how to accommodate himself to others, how to throw himself into their state of mind, how to bring before them his own, how to influence them, how to come to an understanding with them, how to bear with them. ...he knows when to speak and when to be silent; he is able to converse, he is able to listen; he can ask a question pertinently, and gain a lesson seasonably, when he has nothing to impart himself (p. 126).

William Graham Sumner

In 1906, Sumner wrote his seminal book, *Folkways*, in which he detailed the arbitrary nature of social rules, customs, taboos and morals. In it, he envisioned the critical society:

The critical habit of thought, if usual in society, will pervade all its mores, because it is a way of taking up the problems of life. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded by stump orators ... They are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence, uninfluenced by the emphasis or confidence with which assertions are made on one side or the other. They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices and all kinds of cajolery. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens.



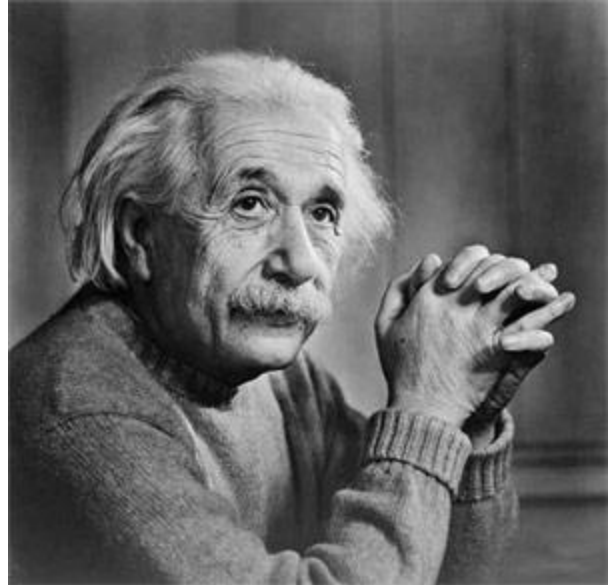
[Critical thinking is] . . . the examination and test of propositions of any kind which are offered for acceptance, in order to find out whether they correspond to reality or not. The critical faculty is a product of education and training. It is a mental habit and power. It is a prime condition of human welfare that men and women should be trained in it. It is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition, and misapprehension of ourselves and our earthly circumstances (pp. 632, 633).

William Graham Sumner, *Folkways*, 1906

Albert Einstein

In the book, *Ideas and Opinions* (1954), Einstein points to the problem of teaching to specialties rather than generalizable knowledge and critical thinking.

I want to oppose the idea that the school has to teach directly that special knowledge and those accomplishments, which one has to use later directly in life. The demands of life are much too manifold to let such as specialized training in school appear possible. ...The school should always have as its aim that the young man leave it as a harmonious personality, not as a specialist...The development of general ability for independent thinking and judgment should always be placed



foremost, not the acquisition of special knowledge. If a person masters the fundamentals of his subject and has learned to think and work independently, he will surely find his way and besides will better be able to adapt himself to progress and changes than the person whose training principally consists in the acquiring of detailed knowledge (p. 62).

It is not enough to teach a man a specialty. Through it he may become a kind of useful machine but not a harmoniously developed personality. It is essential that the student acquire an understanding of and a lively feeling for values. He must acquire a vivid sense of the beautiful and of the morally good. Otherwise he – with his specialized knowledge – more closely resembles a well trained dog than a harmoniously developed person. He must learn to understand the motives of human beings, their illusions, and their sufferings in order to acquire a proper relationship to the individual fellow-men and to the community...Overemphasis on the competitive system and premature specialization on the ground of immediate usefulness kill the spirit on which all cultural life depends, specialized knowledge included. It is also vital to a valuable education that independent critical thinking be developed in the young human being, a development that is greatly jeopardized by overburdening him with too much and with too varied subjects. Overburdening necessarily leads to superficiality (pp. 66-67).

It is not the fruits of scientific research that elevate a man and enrich his nature, but the urge to understand, the intellectual work creative or receptive (p. 12).

In the following passage, Einstein illuminates the importance of intellectual autonomy to the creation of critical societies:

Only the individual can think, and thereby create new values for society, nay, even set up new moral standards to which the life of the community conforms. Without creative personalities able to think and judge independently, the upward development of society

is as unthinkable as the development of the community...In politics not only are leaders lacking, but the independence of spirit and the sense of justice of the citizen have to a great extent declined...In two weeks the sheeplike masses of any country can be worked up by the newspapers into such a state of excited fury that men are prepared to put on uniforms and kill and be killed...the present manifestations of decadence are explained by the fact that economic and technologic developments have highly intensified the struggle for existence, greatly to the detriment of the free development of the individual (p. 15).

In an open letter to the *Society for Social Responsibility in Science*, Einstein emphasizes the importance of individual responsibility in living an ethical life:

The problem of how man should act if his government prescribes actions or society expects an attitude which his own conscience considers wrong is indeed an old one. It is easy to say that the individual cannot be held responsible for acts carried out under irresistible compulsion, because the individual is fully dependent upon the society in which he is living and therefore must accept its rules. But the very formulation of this idea makes it obvious to what extent such a concept contradicts our sense of justice. External compulsion can, to a certain extent, reduce but never cancel the responsibility of the individual. In the Nuremberg trials this idea was considered to be self-evident. Whatever is morally important in our institutions, laws, and mores, can be traced back to interpretation of the sense of justice of countless individuals. Institutions are in a moral sense impotent unless they are supported by the sense of responsibility of living individuals. An effort to arouse and strengthen this sense of responsibility of the individual is an important service to mankind. In our times scientists and engineers carry particular moral responsibility, because the development of military means of mass destruction is within their sphere of activity (p. 27).

With regard to social conformity, Einstein says:

...there is such a thing as a spirit of the times, an attitude of mind characteristic of a particular generation, which is passed on from individual to individual and gives its distinctive mark to a society. Each of us has to do his little bit toward transforming this spirit of the times...Let every man judge by himself, by what he has himself read, not by what others tell him (pp. 29-30).

Bertrand Russell

In the following passages, Bertrand Russell, one of the most influential 20th century philosophers, emphasizes the importance of open and free inquiry. He stresses the critical need to create education systems that foster fairminded pursuit of knowledge and warns of the dangers inherent in dogmatic ideologies.

The conviction that it is important to believe this or that, even if a free inquiry would not support the belief, is one which is common to almost all religions and which inspires all systems of state education...A habit of basing convictions upon evidence, and of giving to them only that degree of certainty which the evidence warrants, would, if it became general, cure most of the ills from which the world is suffering. But at present, in most countries, education aims at preventing the

growth of such a habit, and men who refuse to profess belief in some system of unfounded dogmas are not considered suitable as teachers of the young...



The world that I should wish to see would be one freed from the virulence of group hostilities and capable of realizing that happiness for all is to be derived rather from cooperation than from strife. I should wish to see a world in which education aimed at mental freedom rather than at imprisoning the minds of the young in a rigid armor of dogma calculated to protect them through life against the shafts of impartial evidence. The world needs open hearts and open minds, and it is not through rigid systems, whether old or new, that these can be derived (Russell, 1957, pp. vi-vii).

The conception of Sin which is bound up with Christian ethics is one that does an extraordinary amount of harm, since it affords people an outlet for their sadism which they believe to be legitimate, and even noble. It is not only in regard to sexual behavior but also in regard to knowledge on sex subjects that the attitude of Christians is dangerous to human welfare. Every person who has taken the trouble to study the question in an unbiased spirit knows that the artificial ignorance on sex subjects which orthodox Christians attempt to enforce upon the young is extremely dangerous to mental and physical health, and causes in those who pick up their knowledge by the way of "improper" talk, as most children do, an attitude that sex is in itself indecent and ridiculous. I do not think there can be any defense for the view that knowledge is ever undesirable. I should not put barriers in the way of the acquisition of knowledge by anybody at any age. A person is much less likely to act wisely when he is ignorant than when he is instructed, and it is ridiculous to give young people a sense of sin because they have a natural curiosity about an important matter...There is no rational ground of any sort or kind for keeping a child ignorant of anything that he may wish to know,

whether on sex or any other matter. And we shall never get a sane population until this fact is recognized in early education, which is impossible so long as the churches are able to control educational politics (Russell, 1957, pp. 27- 29).

In his book, *Portraits from Memory*, "Reflections on My Eightieth Birthday," Russell (1956) comments on the long-term nature of change and the importance of moving ever closer toward the creation of critical societies:

...beneath all this load of failure I am still conscious of something that I feel to be victory. I may have conceived theoretical truth wrongly, but I was not wrong in thinking that there is such a thing, and that it deserves our allegiance. I may have thought the road to a world of free and happy human beings shorter than it is proving to be, but I was not wrong in thinking that such a world is possible, and that it is worthwhile to live with a view to bringing it nearer. I have lived in the pursuit of a vision, both personal and social. Personal: to care for what is noble, for what is beautiful, for what is gentle; to allow moments of insight to give wisdom at more mundane times. Social: to see in imagination the society that is to be created, where individuals grow freely, and where hate and greed and envy die because there is nothing to nourish them. These things I believe, and the world, for all its horrors, has left me unshaken.

Russell (1919) also illuminates the fact that the vast majority of people today do not think critically, or indeed ethically, and that those who do will seek a "new system of society." He says:

The great majority of men and women, in ordinary times, pass through life without ever contemplating or criticizing, as a whole, either their own conditions or those of the world at large. They find themselves born into a certain place in society, and they accept what each day brings forth, without any effort of thought beyond what the immediate present requires...they seek the satisfaction of the needs of the moment, without much forethought, and without considering that by sufficient effort the whole condition of their lives could be changed...It is only a few rare and exceptional men who have that kind of love toward mankind at large that makes them unable to endure patiently the general mass of evil and suffering, regardless of any relation it may have to their own lives. These few, driven by sympathetic pain, will seek, first in thought and then in action, for some way of escape, some new system of society by which life may become richer, more full of joy and less full of preventable evils than it is at present (p. viii).

Emma Goldman

Emma Goldman, an important early 20th century activist in the US, argued for, among other things, the right to free speech, the right of women to obtain and use birth control, and the rights of the worker to better conditions and a more fair economic system. She was arrested so often that "she never spoke in public without taking along a book to read in jail (Goldman, p. 3)." In the following passage, she comments on oppressive government, mindless conformity, stratification within society, and sham democracy (as barriers to critical societies):



I have often been asked why I maintained such a noncompromising antagonism to government and in what way I have found myself oppressed by it. In my opinion every individual is hampered by it. It exacts taxes from production. It creates tariffs, which prevent free exchange. It stands ever for the status quo and traditional conduct and belief. It comes into private lives and into most intimate personal relations, enabling the superstitious, puritanical, and distorted ones to impose their ignorant prejudice and moral servitudes upon the sensitive, the imaginative, and the free spirits. Government does this by its divorce laws, its moral censorships, and by a thousand petty persecutions of those who are too honest to wear the moral mask of respectability. In addition, government protects the strong at the expense of the weak, provides courts and laws which the rich may scorn and the poor must obey. It enables the predatory rich to make wars to provide foreign markets for the favored ones, with prosperity for the rulers and wholesale death for the ruled. However, it is not only government in the sense of the state which is destructive of every individual value and quality. It is the whole complex of authority and institutional domination which strangles life. It is the superstition, myth, pretense, evasions, and subservience which support authority and institutional domination. It is the reverence for these institutions instilled in the school, the Church, and the home in order that man may believe and obey without protest. Such a process of devitalizing and distorting personalities of the individual and of whole communities may have been a part of historical evolution; but it should be strenuously combated by every honest and independent mind in an age which has any pretense to enlightenment (pp. 434-435).

It has often been suggested to me that the Constitution of the United States is a sufficient safeguard for the freedom of its citizens. It is obvious that even the freedom it pretends to guarantee is very limited. I have not been impressed with the adequacy of the safeguard. The nations of the world, with centuries of international law behind them, have never hesitated to engage in mass destruction when solemnly pledged to keep the

peace; and the legal documents in America have not prevented the United States from doing the same. Those in authority have and always will abuse their power. And the instances when they do not do so are as rare as roses growing on icebergs. Far from the Constitution playing any liberating part in the lives of the American people, it has robbed them of the capacity to rely on their own resources or do their own thinking. Americans are so easily hoodwinked by the sanctity of law and authority. In fact, the pattern of life has become standardized, routinized, and mechanized like canned food and Sunday sermons. The hundred-percenter easily swallows syndicated information and factory-made ideas and beliefs. He thrives on the wisdom given him over the radio and cheap magazines by corporations whose philanthropic aim is selling America out. He accepts the standards of conduct and art in the same breath with the advertising of chewing gum, toothpaste, and shoe polish (p. 435).

A.E. Mander

In 1936, A.E. Mander wrote a book entitled, *Clearer Thinking*, in which he stressed the importance of conceptualizing the development of thinking as requiring training and discipline, as entailing skills that must be practiced and learned over time and through commitment. He says:

Thinking is skilled work. It is not true that we are naturally endowed with the ability to think clearly and logically – without learning how, or without practicing. It is ridiculous to suppose that any less skill is required for thinking than for carpentering, or for playing tennis, golf, or bridge, or for playing some musical instrument. People with untrained minds should no more expect to think clearly and logically than those people who have never learnt and never practiced can expect to find themselves good carpenters, golfers, bridge-players, or pianists. Yet our world is full of people who apparently do suppose that thinking is entirely unskilled work; that thinking clearly and accurately is so easy and so “natural” that “anybody can think;” and that any person’s thinking is quite as reliable as any other person’s. This accounts for the fact that, as a people, we are so much less efficient in this respect than we are in our sports. For nobody assumes that any game is so easy that we are all first-class players “naturally,” without having to learn how to play or without practice (p. vii).

Erich Fromm

In 1976, Erich Fromm, wrote a book entitled *To Have or To Be*, in which he illuminated the problem of seeking meaning and happiness through material possessions and control over nature, through harnessing resources for human benefit. He says:



The Great Promise of Unlimited Progress – the promise of domination of nature, of material abundance, of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, and of unimpeded personal freedom – has sustained the hopes and faith of the generations since the beginning of the industrial age...With industrial progress...we could feel that we were on our way to unlimited production, and hence, unlimited consumption...that science made us omniscient. We were on our way to becoming gods, supreme beings who could create a second world, using the natural world only as building blocks for our new creation...the industrial age has failed to fulfill its Great Promise, and ever-growing numbers of people are becoming aware that:

- unrestricted satisfaction of all desires is not conducive to well-being, nor is it the way to happiness or even to maximum pleasure.
- The dream of being independent masters of our lives ended when we began awakening to the fact that we have all become cogs in the bureaucratic machine, with our thoughts, feelings, and tastes manipulated by government and industry and the mass communications they control.
- Economic progress has remained restricted to the rich nations, and the gap between rich and poor nations has ever widened.
- Technical progress itself has created ecological dangers and the dangers of nuclear war, either or both of which may put an end to all civilization and possibly all life (p. 2).

[One premise] of the industrial age, that the pursuit of individual egoism leads to harmony and peace, growth in everyone's welfare, is...erroneous...To be an egoist refers not only to my behavior but to my character. It means: that I want everything for myself; that possessing, not sharing, gives me pleasure; that I must become greedy because if my aim is having, I *am* more the more I *have*; that I must feel antagonistic toward all others; my customers whom I want to deceive, my competitors whom I want to destroy, my workers whom I want to exploit. I can never be satisfied, because there is no end to my wishes; I must be envious of those who have more and afraid of those who have less. But I have to repress all these feelings in order to represent myself (to

others a well as to myself). As the smiling, rational, sincere, kind human being everybody pretends to be (p. 6).

H.L. Menken

In the early 20th century, H.L. Menken, one of the most distinguished journalist in United States history, argues for the importance of allowing maximum individual freedoms:



I believe in liberty. And when I say liberty, I mean the thing in its widest imaginable sense — liberty up to the extreme limits of the feasible and tolerable. I am against forbidding anybody to do anything, or say anything, or think anything so long as it is at all possible to imagine a habitable world in which he would be free to do, say, and think it. The burden of proof, as I see it, is always upon the policeman, which is to say, upon the lawmaker, the theologian, the right-thinker. He must prove his case doubly, triply, quadruply, and then he must start all over and prove it again. The eye through which I view him is watery and jaundiced. I do not pretend to be “just” to him — any more than a Christian pretends to be just to the devil. He is the enemy of everything I admire and respect in this world — of everything that makes it various and amusing and charming. He impedes every honest search for the truth. He stands against every sort of good-will and common decency. His ideal is that of an animal trainer, an archbishop, a major general in the army. I am against him until the last galoot’s ashore (pp. 193–194).

John Bury

In 1913, John Bury, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, in a book entitled [*A History of Freedom of Thought*](#), briefly outlines some of the important forces operating both for and against freedom of thought since early Greek and Roman times. Bury sees freedom of thought as intimately connected with freedom to speak one's thoughts without fear.



It is a common saying that thought is free. A man can never be hindered from thinking whatever he chooses so long as he conceals what he thinks. The working of his mind is limited only by the bounds of his experience and the power of his imagination. But this natural liberty of private thinking is of little value. It is unsatisfactory and even painful to the thinker himself, if he is not permitted to communicate his thoughts to others, and it is obviously of no value to his neighbours. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to hide

thoughts that have any power over the mind. If a man's thinking leads him to call in question ideas and customs which regulate the behaviour of those about him, to reject beliefs which they hold, to see better ways of life than those they follow, it is almost impossible for him, if he is convinced of the truth of his own reasoning, not to betray by silence, chance words, or general attitude that he is different from them and does not share their opinions. Some have preferred, like Socrates, some would prefer to-day, to face death rather than conceal their thoughts. Thus, freedom of thought, in any valuable sense, includes freedom of speech.

It has taken centuries to persuade the most enlightened peoples that liberty to publish one's opinions and to discuss all questions is a good and not a bad thing. Human societies (there are some brilliant exceptions) have been generally opposed to freedom of thought, or, in other words, to new ideas, and it is easy to see why (pp.7-8)

Bury also sees people as intellectually indolent, narrowminded and especially averse to ideas that threaten the status quo and established ways of thinking.

The average brain is naturally lazy and tends to take the line of least resistance. The mental world of the ordinary man consists of beliefs which he has accepted without questioning and to which he is firmly attached; he is instinctively hostile to anything which would upset the established order of this familiar world. A new idea, inconsistent with some of the beliefs which he holds, means the necessity of rearranging his mind; and this process is laborious, requiring a painful expenditure of brain-energy. To him and his fellows, who form the vast majority, new ideas, and opinions which cast doubt on established beliefs and institutions, seem evil because they are disagreeable (p. 8).

....novel opinions are felt to be dangerous as well as annoying, and anyone who asks inconvenient questions about the why and the wherefore of accepted principles is considered a pestilent person (p. 9).

The psychological motives which produce a conservative spirit hostile to new ideas are reinforced by the active opposition of certain powerful sections of the community, such as a class, a caste, or a priesthood, whose interests are bound up with the maintenance of the established order and the ideas on which it rests (p. 10).

A long time was needed to arrive at the conclusion that coercion of opinion is a mistake, and only a part of the world is yet convinced. That conclusion, so far as I can judge, is the most important ever reached by men (p. 14).

Charles Bradlaugh

Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) was an important political activist of the 19th century. He founded the National Secular Society in 1866. As a member of Parliament in England, and believing strongly in the separation of church and state, he refused to take the required religious Oath of Allegiance. Instead he attempted to take his seat by only "affirming" the oath. He was briefly imprisoned for doing so. His seat fell vacant and a by-election was declared. Bradlaugh was re-elected by Northampton four times in succession as the dispute continued. Supporting Bradlaugh were William Gladston, George Bernard Shaw and John Stuart Mill, as well as hundreds of thousands of people who signed a public petition. Opposing his right to sit were the Conservative Party, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and other leading figures in the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. He argued for the importance of freedom of speech:



Laws to punish differences of opinion are as useless as they are monstrous. Differences of opinion on politics are denounced and punished as seditious, on religions topics as blasphemous, and on social questions as immoral and obscene. Yet the sedition, blasphemy, and immorality punished in one age are often found to be the accepted, and sometimes admired, political, religious, and social teaching of a more educated period. Heresies are the evidence of some attempt on the part of men to find opinions for themselves.

G. J. Holyoake

In the mid 19th century, a secularist movement was underway in Britain, largely influenced and guided by G. J. Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh. This movement owed much of its root conception of morality to Utilitarianism, "thanks largely to the efforts of James Mill and others, notably John Stuart Mill, the Benthamite doctrine that all behavior is moral which is conducive to "the greatest happiness of the greatest number (McGEE, 1948)"

According to McGee,

A set of doctrines for the early Secularists was proclaimed by Holyoake, when he announced the formation of the "Central Secular Society and urged the founding of a network of local Secular bodies in affiliation with it. Inasmuch as it was in response to this utterance, and the announcement and invitation accompanying it, that bodies calling themselves "Secular" societies sprang into existence, the statement may be accepted as an expression of the views held by the early Secularists. The "Principle" of

the society is defined as "the recognition of the 'Secular' sphere as the province of man," and its "Aims" are said to be:

"1. To explain that science is the sole Providence of Man -- a truth which is calculated to enable a man to become master of his own Fate, and protects him from dependencies that allure him from his duty, unnerve his arm in difficulty, and betray him in danger.

"2. To establish the proposition that Morals are independent of Christianity; in other words, to show that wherever there is a moral end proposed, there is a secular path to it.

"3. To encourage men to trust Reason throughout, and to trust nothing that Reason does not establish -- to examine all things hopeful, respect all things probable, but rely upon nothing without precaution which does not come within the range of science and experience.

"4. To teach men that the universal fair and open discussion of opinion is the highest guarantee of public truth -- that only that theory which is submitted to that ordeal is to be regarded, since only that which endures it can be trusted.

"5. To claim for every man the fullest liberty of thought and action compatible with the possession of like liberty by every other person.

"6. To maintain -- that, from the uncertainty as to whether the inequalities of human condition will be compensated for in another life -- It is the business of intelligence to rectify them in this world; and consequently, that instead of indulging in speculative worship of supposed superior beings, a generous man will devote himself to the patient service of known inferior natures, and the mitigation of harsh destiny, so that the ignorant may be enlightened and the low elevated." [G.J. Holyoake, "Organization of Freethinkers" (1852)]

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