

W. H. T. Jan 12/48
17

ON THE RECORD

By DOROTHY THOMPSON

Ruminations on the Dies Committee

THE problem posed by the existence of the Dies committee and its possible continuance is one which lies at the very heart of democratic government. It is the question of how free institutions and self-governing societies can defend themselves against those organized groups that wish to destroy existing society by the weapons which that society puts into their hands, and whose right to use them it constitutionally and traditionally guarantees.

The first law of any society is self-preservation. Organized society is an immensely complex and delicate organization and organism, and upon its adequately smooth functioning depend, to an ever-increasing extent, the actual physical lives of the millions of human beings who compose it.

It is not a machine that, once set up, functions mechanically until it wears out. Organized society is kept going with tolerable satisfaction to its members as long as most basic physical wants are satisfied, with no too-prodigious demands upon the individual; as long as there is confidence and hope, and as long as there is a sufficient margin for what Jefferson called "the pursuit of happiness" in which, I suppose, should be included the satisfaction of certain human desires almost or perhaps quite as basic as the economic; those arising out of the struggle of the ego for satisfaction and those arising out of the sexual demand for expression and satisfaction.

Man is an animal and not a machine, and in his natural state—for instance, in an untrained childhood—pursues his primary wants in an uninhibited way.

Society, on the contrary, like all education, is to a great extent dependent on the cultivation of inhibitions.

Men learn and are taught to curb their instincts, either by fear of the law or, more subtly, by the pressure of custom and tradition, or by the hope of reward or by the inculcation of moral and religious principles; also sometimes combined with the fear of hell and damnation, and by the constant appeal to reason—to that lofty and unique power that this particular animal has, to develop himself and the natural world around him, by thought.

All societies, at all times, however, live on a volcano. The volcano is not outside, but inside.

Edna St. Vincent Millay was correct, in her great cycle of sonnets "Epitaph for the Race of Man," when she attributed the final demise of homo sapiens not to fire, flood, earthquake or disease, but to the self-destructive forces in man himself, and, through him, in society, which is his creation.

For, although organized society is man's only escape from the jungle, from barbarism into culture, from anarchy into civilization, and although civilization offers him his only hope of freedom—freedom from the most primitive enemies—civilization is purchased at a price, the suppression or curbing of many basic animal instincts, and it is, therefore, continually menaced. If men begin to think that it provides inadequate satisfactions, they will blow it up.

That is happening all over the world, at this moment, in a manner sufficiently volcanic to create an entirely justified alarm.

Now, this business of preserving society cannot simply be reduced to increasing the police controls.

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often, that the bitterest divergences arise, and the choice of method is more often determined by trial and error than by reason and logic.

On the other hand, the exercise of all social rights is hedged about by certain standards—for without standards there can be no civilization.

In our own society, as Professor Max Ascoli very brilliantly pointed out in the current number of "The American Scholar," all freedoms are subjected to certain standards. As a worker I am not permitted by my trade union to depress my colleagues' wages; as an employer I am no longer permitted unlimited exploitation of the need of my employees; I may own property, but the ownership entails considerable obligations. I am encouraged to marry, but not to commit bigamy. The one freedom that remains almost absolute is freedom of speech, extending to freedom of assembly and organization, and here almost no standards are imposed by law.

I may not shout "fire!" in a crowded theater, and I may not libel any person in a way provably damaging to his economic interests, but I may publicly slander and insult my fellow citizens as individuals and groups. I may lie in the most barefaced manner, I may use every trick of demagogical agitation to set one part of society against another. The spoken and printed word has a continual open season.

Now, all this would be all right, perhaps, were it not for the demonstrable fact that the liberties of people have not been dynamited out of their hands, in the twentieth century; they have been talked away from them.

Free speech and a free press, institutions for preserving and extending human freedom, have become the most powerful instruments for the re-establishment of slavery.

And, curiously, liberals bent upon the preservation of free speech are the first to rush to the defense of its would-be destroyers.

But there is only one possible way to preserve free speech, and that is to fight continually for the honor of free speech and for standards of free speech. Otherwise, it becomes an instrument of barbarism, not of civilization; of subjection, not of liberation.

It is not the business of lovers of free speech to fight for liars, knaves and spies! Lovers of free speech must first of all be lovers of speech itself; they must honor speech and demand that it be honorable.

A very great Austrian journalist and grammarian, the late Karl Krauss, predicted the decline of the Austro-Hungarian state from the degradation of the written word in the Austrian press.

He spent years of his life showing how, from day to day, the standards of language were being degraded, until the word was becoming an instrument of intellectual anarchy.

The parable of the Tower of Babel is profound. Even among people who use the same dictionary it is possible to disrupt the whole of society if words are raped of a meaning common to that society. That rape is going on today!

To what extent the degradation is accomplished already can be seen by reading the revolutionary writings of Thomas Jefferson or the great reform utterances of Abraham Lincoln and comparing them with the verbiage of "The Daily Worker" or of "Social Justice"!

Since we rightly fear to assault free speech, our constant demand for standards must be accelerated. And certainly we have a right to know all there is to know about the speakers. If they are agents of the Communist International, handing out dope cooked up for them to the last "i" and "t" by the party line,

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They have depended on more subtle social pressures, and have been opposed to rigidities.

Our own political system is founded on the concept of checks and balances and has always preferred elasticity to a more obvious and immediate efficiency.

And unless society can constantly make new adjustments to new situations it will crack. There is no such thing as a static society. The only alternative to revolution, which is sudden, violent and catastrophic change, is reform, which is continual change.

Therefore, the radical has a very important social function. Through him symptoms of social illness become articulate. The articulate malcontent is as essential to a healthy social organism as a man's left arm is to his body.

One of the great functions of free speech, free press and free assembly is the airing of grievances, which it is then the function of those who govern, whether in the political or economic fields, to weigh and to correct.

It is also a function of free discussion to consider the means of correcting evils, and it is here,

daily, they have been driven away from them.

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So, in so far as the Dies committee has given the American public a picture of the methods of some very unscrupulous enemies of organized society, it has performed a function.

But let us, while watching the Dozenbergs, Kuhns, Browders and the others, also keep an eye on the Dies committee.

For the Dies committee might easily develop into a political police, into our own little Gestapo.

The word "Red" is just an appellation in lieu of a definition. Honest radicals have a necessary function. There is plenty that is rotten in Denmark, and if everybody who gets indignant about it is gagged, how are the complacent to be awakened?

Radicalism honest and intelligent and radicalism corrupt and mendacious both thrive only when there are real grievances that can be aired, or exaggerated or exploited.

The report of the Dies committee is praiseworthy for noting this. And the business of the public is to see that they do not forget it.