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Appeal to the Crowd

Fallacy Number Nine

AD POPULUM

AT THE Democratic National Convention of 1896, strong men are said to have fainted when William Jennings Bryan, candidate for President, reached his peroration:

> You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorn. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold!

The speech was compared favorably with the best efforts of Demosthenes, Cicero, and Daniel Webster, and won Bryan the nomination, though not the election. Now we know that it was pure political hokum, bolstering a very dubious economic argument for the free coinage of silver with an appeal to (1) the symbol of the noble working man, and (2) the symbol of the crucifixion.

Some years earlier a deputation of Protestant clergymen in New York waited upon James G. Blaine, the Republican candidate for President. Their spokesman, one Samuel Dickerman Burchard, cut himself another generous slice of hokum, now found in the history books:

> We are Republicans, and don't propose to leave our party and identify ourselves with the party whose antecedents have been rum, Romanism and Rebellion.

The Reverend Mr. Burchard was of course referring to the Democrats, who were not ardent advocates of prohibition, who were supported by much of the Catholic vote in large cities, and had advocated slavery below the Mason and Dixon line before the Civil War. His three R's spread like wildfire in the campaign.

President Theodore Roosevelt, a Republican, lashed out at "malefactors of great wealth" in a speech at Provincetown in 1907. In 1933 Franklin D. Roosevelt, Democrat, advocated "driving the money-changers out of the temple," and, like Bryan, stepped up his appeal by a theological reference.

ARGUMENTUM AD POPULUM

This fallacy is an attempt to win an argument by an appeal to the crowd, the mass, the mob, rather than by reason. If it has somewhat snobbish overtones, we should remember that it was defined by the classicists long before the rise of democracy in our modern sense. Even in this country, as last as the early 1800's, Alexander Hamilton exclaimed: "Your people, sir, is a great beast."

Every society has its popular credos, myths, and systems of belief, varying slowly with time, and also with the subgroups inside the society. The beliefs of farmers differ somewhat from those of city-dwellers, as the Romans well knew. The fallacy of *ad populum* arises when a political or social issue is argued not on its merits, but by an emotional appeal to a popular view or a slogan.

Ad populum could be classified as a branch of propaganda, and the fallacy is indeed widely used in propaganda. But the latter, as we shall develop it in Chapters 20 and 21, is not only more comprehensive but more cynical. Bryan, for all his incandescent verbiage, really believed in the doctrine of free silver, while the hard-boiled propagandist rarely believes

in anything but himself. *Ad populum*, too, as one of the classic fallacies, was identified long before the advent of the mass media—without which modern propaganda could not get off the ground.

There are two large groups in America susceptible to *ad populum* appeals: (1) the rank and file of citizens, with modest incomes, and (2) the "Main Street" group, with somewhat higher incomes. Persons with incomes above twelve thousand dollars a year are relatively too small a class to warrant a "popular" appeal. Bryan sought to influence the rank and file and so did the two Roosevelts, in the above quotations. The Reverend Mr. Burchard was aiming more at Main Street with his striking Alliteration of "Rum, Romanism and Rebellion."

RANK-AND-FILE SYMBOLS

"The voice of the people," said Bryan again, quoting a Latin tag, "is the Voice of God." The Great Commoner seldom failed to grasp any celestial hand available. His rival, President McKinley, was more mundane, but perhaps equally effective, when he proffered "The Full Dinner Pail" to the workers.

As the rank and file tended to resent the more affluent, the symbolism addressed to them ran to attacks on "The Trusts," "Monopolists," "Profiteers," "Vested Interest," "Plutocrats," "Wall Street," and "Bloated Bond Holders." Here, for instance, is a cartoon drawn by Art Young for the 1912 presidential campaign, which shows "capitalism" as a vast, bloated hog, crushing the whole countryside, with the caption "Time to Butcher."

Today in 1956, with full employment, a car, electric gadgets, and TV in most American homes, the symbolism is showing serious signs of wear and tear. A nation-wide survey in 1954 by the Institute of Social Relations at Michigan University, indicated that some three quarters of all Americans, while

hardly enamored of "Big Business," felt that large American corporations, on balance, had done more good than harm. Art Young's cartoon would be meaningless to the rank and file of 1956.

MAIN STREET'S SYMBOLS

The Main Street group is smaller in numbers, but its spokesmen today are more vocal. They speak primarily for the business community, and their symbols, both positive and negative, are many and colorful. The "Middletown" study listed more than a hundred Main Street credos in the 1930's, most of them still in vigorous use.[1] The "Pauper Labor of Europe" is perhaps fading, together with "Bombs and Free Love." "Widows and Orphans," a once poplar warning against taxes on inheritances and corporate profits (widows and orphans would suffer, if not starve) is no longer heard.

The conservative debater, however, can still denounce "Labor Agitators Who Should Go Back Where They Came From," "Government Interference," "Welfare State, "Socialized Medicine," "Bureaucracy and Red Tape," "Tinkering with the Currency," "Spending," "Handouts," and "Down the Rat-Hole of Europe." Considerable mileage also remains in "You Can't Change Human Nature."

On the approved side, "The Gold Standard" has lost some of its appeal, but "Our Free Enterprise System" and "Balance the Budget," draw highly favorable responses. At the moment, the latter seems perhaps the loftiest phrase in the whole litany of Main Street.

As a C.P.A. who once did some work on the federal budget, I marvel at how it has ceased to be an accounting matter, to become instead largely a doctrinal if not a theological matter. Not one American in a thousand, I am sure, understands the

[1] Robert and Helen Lynd.

distinction between a cash budget, and accrued budget carrying receivables and payables, and a capital budget, where long-term earning assets are excluded from annual income and outgo. These technical considerations, so essential to a proper fiscal policy, are submerged in a single credo, charged with emotion: "Balance the Budget!" What budget? When? At whose cost? Such questions are almost never asked.

DON GIUSTINO GOES INTO ACTION

Norman Douglas, in his famous satire *South Wind*, gives us a caricature of the demagogic lawyer, larding his case with appeals to popular prejudice and emotion. An Englishman has been murdered on the island of Nepenthe—which might be Capri—off the Italian coast. Signor Malipizzo, the local magistrate, has apprehended a half-witted boy as the murderer, and he feels that he needs a conviction to consolidate his position. His enemies meanwhile retain the great politico-lawyer Don Giustino from the mainland to defend the accused.

The courtroom is packed. Don Giustino begins in a voice so low that the audience must lean forward to hear him. "What a lovely place is your fair island of Nepenthe," he says. What fortunate escape you have had from destruction by the volcano across the bay. It was nothing less than divine intervention by your Patron Saint which saved you! Your fertile fields are intact, the crops unhurt. Fathers can return at eve to gather round the family board. Family life, the sacred hearth! This poor lad had a mother. Ah, motherhood!

By this time many in the audience are choking up — even though the poor lad happens to be an orphan, his mother unknown. Somebody whispers this fact to Don Giustino, and without a pause he reverses his direction. To rescue a motherless young soul, he says, from the brink of perdition is the noblest task of a Christian. Thank God this is still a Christian

country in spite of the plots of heretics and unbelievers! Down with all foreigners! We know what they are and how they work for evil high and low.… They contaminate our land with their Godless depravity … a pest, a contagion …

Don Giustino's famous vocal cords roll out a climax against marplots, especially those of English orgin. The great Deputy ceases to speak. Signor Malipizzo has swooned away and the case is won! The accused lad is free. (He was innocent all along.)

I have paraphrased only a little of this masterpiece, but enough to show that Don Guistino has appealed to no less than ten symbols shared by the people of Nepenthe: the Homeland, the Patron Saint, the Fertile Earth, the Family at eve around the Sacred Hearth, Motherhood, pity for Orphans, the Christian religion, down with Unbelievers, down with Foreigners. Eight are positive, two negative, and he did not fail to sound the conspiracy note -- Unbelievers and Foreigners plotting to destroy us. It would be difficult to find a more comprehensive illustration of *ad populum*. The real issue of the boy's guilt or innocence is lost in a thick fog of symbolism.

"THEY"

"They say the Russians are ready to revolt." "They say that necklines will be lower." "They say that Truman wants to run again." "They say a flying saucer landed in California and little green men came out."

It does no good to ask who "they" are. "They" are as nameless as they are infallible. "I heard it on the radio." "It said so in the paper." "I saw an article somewhere …" This is as much documentation as one is likely to get. It is an appeal to bogus authority, for the locus can never be fixed. "They" sit like gods on Olympus, seeing all, knowing all, beyond mortal ken. People who rely most strongly on "they" read few

books and have never heard of checking sources. "They" always preserve anonymity, for to name a "they" is, by definition, to destroy him. Even if the appeal is to a ghostly authority, can we call it *ad verecundiam*? No, for I think the phenomenon is closer to *ad populum*. "They" are a symbol too, and a powerful one.

> The Navy calls it "scuttlebutt." The layman terms it "grapevine." The housewife says it's "gossip." But in every case it is accepted as sheer gospel. Why? Because "They" said it was so. And who is "They?" The Admiral? The President? The storekeeper? Sh-sh! Don't say. For that would spoil it all by making you think. Keep it general. Keep it indefinte. Blame it on "They."[2]

The fallacy of *ad populum*, like "they," is a device to bypass independent thinking. The sight or the sound of symbols triggers the mind to run in well-worn emotional grooves and reach well-worn conclusions.

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[2] From *Purchasing*, a house organ, 205 E. 42nd St., New York City.