

H.L. Mencken and the roots of Bush's American fascism

by Charles Hughes

The Diary of H.L. Mencken

edited by Charles A. Fecher
Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1989
476 pages, hardbound, \$30

On February 6, 1990, the Associated Press released a story about the just-published diary of H.L. Mencken, one of the century's most controversial journalists and literary critics. Locked away in a vault of Baltimore's Pratt Library since 1956 when Mencken died, a legal provision of Mencken's will stated that the book was not to be made available to researchers for 25 years. The AP story stated that the diary would be found to be extremely offensive to blacks and Jews, but that nevertheless Mencken should continue to be honored with a memorial room at the National Press Club: "The library at the National Press Club will continue to bear the name of journalist H.L. Mencken despite what the club's secretary described as 'despicable' remarks about Jews and blacks in Mencken's recently published diaries."

I will go the Associated Press and other critics' one better and show that the Mencken diary is offensive to just about every American as well.

The importance of H.L. Mencken in American journalism and literary criticism lies in his obvious role in his unrelenting attack on American republican values during his life in the period 1910-40 in American culture. Mencken was a prolific writer and published over 50 volumes of essays, criticisms, commentaries on music, language, and translated material. He claimed to be the first popularizer of the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and compared the American population

which he termed the "booboisie" to Nietzsche's slave proletariat. He attempted to popularize anti-republican and anti-Christian ideas such as euthanasia and eugenics as well as bizarre ideas on government and laissez-faire, at one point arguing for the abolition of public transit and even sidewalks in New York City on the grounds that the rich pay for the sidewalks and the poor use them, which is unfair.

Very much like his favorite authors, Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce, Mencken's philosophy boiled down to a vicious mixture of extreme cultural pessimism.

This pessimism is reflected in the diary, where he describes the descent into decay and alcoholism of his many literary protégés. Mencken had promoted writers of the Twain stripe in the publications which he controlled such as the "smart set" and *American Mercury* magazines. Such writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis and Willa Cather, whose literary productions dealt with "American realism" themes such as murder, adultery, sexual deviation, and moral corruption, are by and large the authors and works taught in college as American contemporary literature! From the Mencken diary a sample: April 27, 1932—"F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife were here to lunch yesterday. Mrs. Fitzgerald is a patient at the Phipps Clinic. The poor girl went insane in Paris a year or so ago, and is still plainly more or less off her base. . . . Fitzgerald is a heavy drinker, and most of his experience has been got in bars." Noting the continuing deterioration of the author of *The Great Gatsby*, the entry for June 12, 1934 is pertinent: "The case of F. Scott Fitzgerald becomes distressing. . . . Several years ago, visiting Joe Hergesheimer at West Chester, Pennsylvania, he caused a town sensation by arising at the dinner table and taking down his pantaloons, exposing his gospel pipe."

Mencken comments on the occasion of the centenary of Nietzsche's birth, Oct. 15, 1944, that this date if it is noted anywhere in America will be on the ground that he was a wicked fellow and the inspiration for Hitler, and because of that there is little hope for America.

Exposing his lack of moral purpose in an entry for Nov. 29, 1939, Mencken says that he does not write for the purpose of reform, but only to provide a *catharsis* for his own thoughts. "This may be a kind of insanity, but in all events it is free of moral purpose."

Of the last four years covering the period of World War II, there is very scant mention of the war. Such may well give substance to speculations that Mencken was not only pro-German, but a Hitler sympathizer. One such entry for April 27, 1944 should be quoted at length: "I went to New York on Sunday April 23 for the A.P. Orgies, and had dinner with Blanche Knopf. I told her I believed that the little book of Prayers for soldiers just brought out by the house, disgraced its list and damaged its trade mark. There are actually prayers by Generals Eisenhower and Patton—the latter the hero who lately got into the newspaper by cuffing a wounded soldier . . . the idea for a book of prayers, she said came from Bernard Smith, the sales manager. What his name was before he changed it I do not know. He, too, is a Jew, and moreover, a Jackass."

Note also this entry on Gen. George S. Patton, Jr. for Dec. 16, 1943: "Fishbein (Editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*) told me that he believes all the higher officers of the American Army should be examined by psychiatrists. . . . He lately said that General Patton, who was lately hauled up for assault upon a wounded soldier, was plainly more or less cuckoo. He is an extremely excitable and noisy fellow, and always bursts into tears when his emotions are stirred. His infirmity is well known in the Army, but nevertheless Roosevelt insisted upon giving him a high commission."

It will come as no shock to those familiar with Mencken the racist curmudgeon from his published essays such as "prejudices I-VI," that the diary incredibly enough attacks blacks, whites, and Jews.

Here are some examples: writing on Sept. 23, 1943 about an accidental fall taken by his maid, Emma Ball, who had overpolished the floor, Mencken insists that it is impossible to talk anything resembling discretion or judgment into a colored woman. "They are all essentially childlike, and even hard experience does not teach them anything."

Strange to relate, Mencken hated whites as well. "The Hollins Street neighborhood is slowly going downhill. . . . Filthy poor whites from Appalachia and the Southern Tidewater are already living in the 1600 and 1700 blocks, and their foul children and dogs swarm in Union Square." And in another entry: "As for the damage to their virtue, it is purely imaginary, for only a rare linthead girl remains a virgin after the age of 12. Her deflowering, in fact, is usually

performed by her brothers, and if not by her brothers then by her father. Incest is almost as common as fornication among this vermin, and no doubt it is largely responsible for their physical and mental deterioration. Everyone who knows the Southern poor whites knows this, but it is not mentioned in official reports."

The incident of expulsion of a Jewish citizen from Mencken's club, the Maryland Club, is reported in the entry for Dec. 16, 1943: "Some time ago, two members of the club nominated for membership a man named Winter. This Winter seemed to be presentable fellow and he was promptly elected. One day he was seen entertaining an elderly and palpably Jewish gentleman in the dining room . . . it turned out the guest was his father. When this news was brought to Mason, he started an investigation, and presently found that Winter's actual name was Winternitz. . . . It appeared that they had not suspected that he was a Jew and knew nothing about his change of name. One of them went to him and told him that the discovery of the facts had greatly embarrassed him, and Winter-Winternitz resigned at once!"

Since only about a third of the total diary was edited and published by Fecher, it is probable that more entries showing Mencken in an even worse light were left out. Over the coming years, more of Mencken's unpublished writings are to be released, but I doubt that there will be any surprises.

Yes, I think it were better to remove the Mencken Room from the National Press Club. If many journalists object, perhaps the whole business would be better kept in the Museum of Natural History.

'The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche'

Friedrich Nietzsche was born in Prussia, on Oct. 15, 1844 in the village of Röcken. His father was a Protestant pastor and Nietzsche was descended from a long line of Protestant divines from both sides of his family. Friedrich's sister Therese played an important part in his career and became his first biographer. In 1864, he enrolled in the University of Bonn; the philosophers Hobbes and Schopenhauer—and perhaps the anarchist Max Stirner—were the leading influences on him. While at Bonn, he became violently anti-Christian.

The tradition that he chose to follow was that of the oligarchical and usurious slave states of the ancient world: namely, Rome and Persia—otherwise identified by Friedrich Schiller as the model of Sparta against Plato's model of Athens. Nietzsche added to this oligarchical tradition an element of unreason magnitudes greater, or, as he termed it, being a "dionysian."

Through the influence of powerful friends such as the philologist Ritschl, Wagner, and others, Nietzsche became a professor at the University of Leipzig, and later in Switzerland at Basel. In 1872, he began to write down his worldview, which toted up to 18 volumes. He died in Weimar in 1900, some say the result of induced insanity and strokes. He is



Friedrich Nietzsche, “superhero” of the brand of journalism practiced by Mencken, and guiding luminary of the Nazis.

buried in Röcken.

Although there is only one direct reference to Nietzsche in Mencken’s diary, Oct. 15, 1943, this philosopher is the major influence on Mencken. Mencken’s several biographers do not like to admit that fact. One such reference in a book on *American Literary History* is more honest and notes, “But most of his intellectual gods as he admitted were German, and Nietzsche formed his mind more than any one else . . . so Mencken laid about him with a slashing style that was full of Nietzschean mannerisms.”¹

Ben Hecht, a Mencken disciple and collaborator, in his own autobiography also points to the influence of Nietzsche on Mencken, “His ideas and points of view were to be found sometimes in other men—Nietzsche, Pollard, Huneker, Bierce, Brandes, Schopenhauer, Voltaire. But they existed there like a retired army in full dress. Mencken put battle suits on them and sent them forth in my century.”²

Mencken’s very first venture into bookwriting was his 1908 *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, an explanation of Nietzsche’s ideas for Americans which was an overnight success and eventually went through at least three editions. One of Mencken’s biographers, Carl Bode, accused Mencken of exceeding Nietzsche in ferocity and said that Nietzsche himself had doubts about Darwin’s survival of the fittest doctrine, but Mencken—never. So in this book Mencken takes Nietzschean anti-human doctrine and comes up with something much worse.

Recall that this was the era of Theodore Roosevelt, or, as Mencken called him, “Roosevelt Major.” Mencken fitted in exactly to these times of American cultural collapse, with its social Darwinism, eugenics, and general pessimism.

The very last book written by Mencken in 1956, which may be the most Nietzschean of all, is *Minority Report*, consisting of material from H.L. Mencken’s notebooks. By examining these two books, I might be safe in surmising that his other 48 books written from 1910 to 1948 were also quite Nietzschean. Mencken himself admits many times that he had not basically changed any of his ideas throughout his career; he considered such changes to go against his integrity. He remained a thorough Nietzschean his whole life.

Perhaps Mencken’s obsession with Nietzsche explains his own spectacular success in the field of journalism. This was the time when the British financial oligarchy was firming up its control of America, and the ideas of Nietzsche were almost made to specification for the purpose of destroying America’s faith in technological progress, even when Mencken took pains to appear to be libertarian and an anti-establishment rebel.

Mencken explains in the preface to his book on Nietzsche that American interest in Nietzsche is very prominent and that the pressure of Nietzschean ideas is considerable in current literature and periodicals. His first edition of the book sold out at once, after Nietzsche had been dead less than a decade. He deals with Nietzsche’s ideas superficially, in chapters titled with such categories as “Government,” “Christianity,” “Civilization,” “Morality,” and a final chapter on how to study him. The commentary throughout the book is uncritical of Nietzsche and often surpasses the original in barbarity.

Here, to make the point of Nietzsche’s influence, I will concentrate on the chapter on government. First, let us deal with the one fact known to most Americans who have heard of Nietzsche at all, and that is the fact that he was insane. What does Mencken say about this? Mencken explains in “Nietzsche’s critics”: “That Nietzsche died insane is undoubted, and that his insanity was not sudden in its onset is also plain, and one may even admit frankly that it is visible here and there in his writings . . . but that his principal doctrines, the ideas upon which his fame is based, are the fantasies of a maniac is certainly false. . . . Ibsen also passed out of life in mental darkness and so did Schumann, but no responsible critic would seek thereby to deny all intelligibility to *Peer Gynt* or to the Piano Quintet in E-flat.”³

Mencken stresses the importance of Nietzsche’s concept of the nature of man and the means by which man progresses. But what is a man? He says that in all of Nietzsche’s writings, a human being means a being of a higher sort, not a person of the drudge class who is unable to think for himself and is unworthy of consideration for such its highest mission was to serve the master class. He adds that man’s reason is subordinated to and an offshoot of the highest natural law, that of self-preservation, and is but a puny offshoot at that.

In defense of slavery

Mencken seemed to enjoy the prospect of most of humanity being enslaved under Nietzsche’s regime, which Men-

cken figures at about two-thirds. Nietzsche wrote: "We ponder over the need of a new order of things—even a new slavery, for the strengthening and elevation of the human race always involves the existence of slaves."⁴ Mencken tells us that the new order is quite different from Christianity, Islam, or even Buddhism. Its main goal is increasing the power of the master class. Anything which increases such power, or such a will to power is good, anything which proceeds from weakness is evil. But the lower orders of men are merely a conglomeration of draft animals made to be driven, enslaved and exploited. Complete surrender to the law of natural selection is demanded. This law ordains that the fit shall survive and the unfit perish. "Every man is either a master or a slave, and the same is true of every race. Either it rules some other race or it is itself ruled by some other race."⁵

In Chapter 10 in *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, we see how Mencken conceives of a Nietzschean government. Mencken shows that a Nietzschean state is not an absolute monarchy, nor is it a dictatorship, but an oligarchy—the rule of a large dominating caste. The concentration of power in a monarch, or even a small military-judicial class is defective, says Mencken, for that would lead to stagnation of the state. An oligarchy has less chance of becoming reactionary, is willing to conduct social experiments.

Democracy on the other hand is not to be considered because the masses of ordinary people are "naturally incompetent, ignorant, credulous, superstitious, corrupt, and wrong."⁶ The oligarchy must work more or less by means of anarchic relationships among members of the upper castes. Each member of the ruling caste should be at liberty to work out his own destiny; no laws must be made to prevent the free association with his peers. At the same time, the oligarchy must never be forced by the lower strata to pass any laws for the lower castes' benefit! The upper castes have absolutely no responsibility to those below them. If this seems to describe how the present Anglo-American elites would like to rule, that is more than coincidental.

The masses, Mencken insists, have no right to exist on their own account. They are a superstructure, or scaffolding upon which a more select race of beings may be elevated. American democracy benefits drunken loafers, whereas the salutary effect of the Nietzschean state would be to bring the men of progress to the top of society, those strong, free, self-reliant men, whose capacities are so much greater than the mob, that they may force their ideas upon it; Nietzschean anarchy would create an aristocracy of efficiency.

The notebooks of a literary thug

Mencken published his *Minority Report*, or *The Mencken Notebooks* at the end of his life, in 1956. This book consisted of about 400 maxims and aphorisms embodying his most cherished ideas, gathered over his career from 1900-56. In this very concentrated writing, it is much easier to feel the

full shock of the essential H.L. Mencken, in contrast to his three-volume autobiography, or the "prejudices" books. The *Minority Report* was given that name, perhaps, because Mencken intends to show how he represents a minority position with respect to the other 99% of the human race. By the nature of these outrageous snippets of writing, we can, I hope, see his application of Nietzschean method to various aspects of American and universal issues. In the preface of

One of Mencken's biographers, Carl Bode, accused Mencken of exceeding Nietzsche in ferocity and said that Nietzsche himself had doubts about Darwin's survival of the fittest doctrine, but Mencken—never.

the *Notebooks*, he writes: "Thus I make no apology for printing my brief and often crude memoranda."⁷

- On the proper type of government for South Americans: "Probably the only decent government ever heard of in South America was the one set up by the Jesuits in Paraguay . . . while it existed, Paraguay was well governed and life was safe, but as soon as it fell, there followed a bath of blood. The totalitarian paternalism of the Jesuits apparently fitted South American conditions enormously better than democracy."⁸

- Some comments on American demographics are proffered further on, "The great problem ahead of the United States is that of reducing the high differential birth rate of the inferior orders, for example the hillbillies of Appalachia, the gimme farmers of the Middle West, the lintheads of the South, and the negros [sic]."⁹

- If there be any doubt that Mencken believed the American farmer was in the lower orders of the mass read the following: "If all the farmers in the Dust Bowl were shot tomorrow and all the share croppers in the South burned at the stake, every decent American would be better off, and not a soul would miss a meal."¹⁰

Notes

1. *Our Literary Heritage*, Brooks and Bettman, 1956, p. 222.
2. *A Child of the Century*, Ben Hecht, 1954, p. 177.
3. *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, H.L. Mencken, 1908, p. 272.
4. *The Joyful Wisdom*, Friedrich Nietzsche, p. 377.
5. *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 82.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
7. *The Minority Report* H.L. Mencken, p. 4.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 252.