DEMOCRACY and LEADERSHIP

Irving Babbitt

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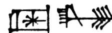
IRVING BABBITT

Foreword by Russell Kirk



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Such legislation [against private property] may have a specious appearance of benevolence; men readily listen to it, and are easily induced to believe that in some wonderful manner everybody will become everybody's friend, especially when someone is heard denouncing the evils now existing in states, . . . which are said to arise out of the possession of private property. These evils, however, are due to a very different cause — the wickedness of human nature.

ARISTOTLE: *Politics*, 1263b, 11

Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free.

BURKE: *Letter to a member of the National Assembly*

The fundamental article of my political creed is that despotism or unlimited sovereignty or absolute power is the same in a majority of a popular assembly, an aristocratical council, an oligarchical junto, and a single emperor — equally arbitrary, cruel, bloody, and in every respect diabolical.

JOHN ADAMS: *Letter to Thomas Jefferson* (November 13, 1815)

Den einzelnen Verkehrtheiten des Tags sollte man immer nur grosse weltgeschichtliche Massen entgegensetzen.

GOETHE: *Sprüche*

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FOREWORD

By Russell Kirk

"The first thing to note about this book is that it constitutes one of those rare applications of a general intelligence to the sphere of politics." So Herbert Read, an anarchist, wrote of Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership* when it was published in 1924. Babbitt's motive in this book, Read continued, was that of his other works: "the reestablishment of humanistic standards in place of the utilitarian, humanitarian, or romantic confusions so prevalent everywhere today."

Read found fault with Irving Babbitt for Babbitt's hostility toward the Soviet Union and for Babbitt's not seeing Christianity "relatively enough"—the latter rather an odd criticism, when one considers Babbitt's uneasiness with organized churches and his refusal to pass in his books beyond the realm of ethics to the realm of religion. (To his friend Paul Elmer More, Babbitt once exclaimed, "Great God, man, are you a Jesuit in disguise?") Yet Read was a kindly critic, by the side of the latter-day

liberals and socialists who then were dominant in intellectual circles. Much of Babbitt's life was spent in controversy—including public debates—with the disciples of Rousseau, Marx, and Dewey, whom he cudgeled in his writings.

Babbitt left no disciples, Harold Laski wrote in his *American Democracy*. But this is a proof of Laski's superficiality where American thought was in question. It is true that Babbitt, during the hue and cry which the Left raised against him, more than once told his students to remember what he said, if they liked, and to employ his ideas, if they chose to, but not to quote him directly: for that would bring anathema upon them. Yet there have been men of eminence who have been proud to quote Babbitt, ever since he commenced lecturing at Harvard; T. S. Eliot's is the greatest name among these. University and college presidents like Nathan Pusey and Gordon Keith Chalmers have been his disciples; some of the better-known Catholic writers and some of the more able Protestant clergymen have acknowledged their debt to him; and his books still are sought after.

Babbitt initially was surprised at the fierce animosity his books provoked among naturalists and men of the Left. Those persons recognized in him and in Paul Elmer More their most intelligent and courageous opponents; and their hatred, hardened into dogmas of negation, lingers on. A quarter of a century ago, long after Babbitt's death, James T. Farrell denounced Babbitt as the arch-priest of "traditionalism"; but it became clear to readers of Farrell's essay that the novelist-critic simply did not know what Babbitt actually believed. Arthur M. Schles-

inger, Jr., has referred to Babbitt as the defender of the "genteel tradition"; but Schlesinger either misunderstood Babbitt or misapprehended George Santayana's term "genteel tradition." Peter Gay, with more forthrightness than elegance, has declared that Babbitt's "essential vulgarity" was displayed by Babbitt's attacks on the character of his opponents, notably Rousseau. Now I do not know that it really is vulgar to criticize the character of a writer long dead, or that the private life of a social reformer is totally irrelevant to his public professions. More to the point just now, however, is my sneaking suspicion that many such people who heap vituperation upon Babbitt have not read Babbitt at all, but merely some hostile summary of his work in a book like Oscar Cargill's *Intellectual America,* adorned with quotations badly severed from their context.

For those who have read Babbitt, and know something of the man's life, it is amusing to find him described as vulgar: for he was the antithesis of vulgarity. Not that he was a "Brahmin," another absurd charge sometimes made, in the same breath, by his adversaries: he was a farm boy, a reporter in Cincinnati, and a cowboy in Wyoming, well before he became a Harvard professor. But he lived with a high dignity that was reflected in his very dress, and disdained easy success or popularity, and flattered nobody.

James T. Farrell made the blunder, repeatedly, of referring to him as "Dr. Babbitt"—when no man was less Herr Doktor Professor. Babbitt held the Germanic doctoral degree in merciless contempt, and fought with equal fervor against the degradation of the American college

into a luxurious center for dilettantes and against the false specialization of the Ph.D.

Babbitt was born in Ohio in 1865 and died in Massachusetts in 1933. For a thinker so much discussed in his own day, Babbitt's literary production was not large: in addition to *Democracy and Leadership,* he published five other books—*Literature and the American College, On Being Creative and Other Essays, The Masters of Modern French Criticism, The New Laokoon,* and *Rousseau and Romanticism.* Also he translated the *Dhammapada,* and posthumously there was published a collection of his periodical pieces, *Spanish Character and Other Essays,* with a bibliography of his writings. No biography of this talented and manly Harvard professor of French literature has been written; but there exists a collection of brief memoirs by his friends and disciples, *Irving Babbitt, Man and Teacher,* edited by Frederick Manchester and Odell Shepard.

Babbitt was a principal leader of the intellectual movement called American Humanism, or the New Humanism, which for a generation filled the serious journals of the United States and Britain with friendly or hostile criticism, and which remains a living force in any American educational institution worthy of the name—although usually professed, in any university, only by a staunch minority. The American Humanists contended against the Marxist, Freudian, Instrumentalist, and Naturalist schools of opinion.

John Dewey and his associates, in 1933, alarmed at the growing interest in the American Humanists, made a disingenuous attempt to capture the word "humanism"

by issuing what they called "The Religious Humanist Manifesto." Now Dewey's friends, with few exceptions, were not religious men; and when once Dewey himself was asked why he employed in his writings certain religious overtones quite inconsonant with his naturalistic system, he replied that to cut away at once the last vestiges of religious sentiment might wound some people unnecessarily; they must be accustomed more gradually to the divorce. The "humanism" which the Deweyites endeavored to promulgate has survived as a militant secularism; the word "religious" has gone by the board. But Dewey's humanism has little or no connection with the ancient continuity of thought and education which Babbitt, More, and their colleagues expounded.

What did Babbitt and the other American Humanists believe? To put matters very briefly, genuine humanism is the belief that man is a distinct being, governed by laws peculiar to his nature: there is law for man, and there is law for thing. Man stands higher than the beasts that perish because he recognizes and obeys this law of his nature. The disciplinary arts of *humanitas* teach man to put checks upon his will and his appetite. Those checks are provided by reason—not the private rationality of the Enlightenment, but the higher reason which grows out of a respect for the wisdom of our ancestors and out of the endeavor to apprehend order in the person and order in the republic. The sentimentalist, who would subject man to the forces of impulse and passion; the pragmatic materialist, who would treat man as a mere edified ape; the leveling enthusiast, who would reduce human personality to a collective mediocrity—these are

the enemies of true human nature, and against them Irving Babbitt directed his books.

It is the humane tradition and discipline which keep us civilized and maintain a decent civil social framework, Babbitt argued. As Lynn Harold Hough wrote, Babbitt believed that "he lived in a world where undisciplined and expansive emotion was running riot." The modern world was dedicating itself to the study of subhuman relationships, which it took for the whole of life; it was sinking into unreason. "If by science you meant the discovery and the use of every truth you could find in every realm," Hough put it, "nothing would have pleased Babbitt more than to be regarded as the exponent of the scientific mind. But he believed that the naturalistic scientist ignored truths even more important than those which he discovered, and so he set men going wrong." Babbitt meant to restore an understanding of true humanism, that modern culture might know again the greatness and the limitations of human nature.

Against the humanist, Babbitt set the humanitarian. The humanist, by an act of will, strives to develop the higher nature in man; but the humanitarian believes in "outer working and inner laissez faire," material gain, and emancipation from moral obligations. What the humanist desires is a working in the soul of man; what the humanitarian hungers for is the gratification of all appetites in an equality of condition impossible to realize. Bacon symbolized for Babbitt the utilitarian aspect of humanitarianism, the lust for power over society and nature. Rousseau symbolized for him the sentimental aspect of humanitarianism, the treacherous impulse to

break what Edmund Burke had called "the contract of eternal society" and to substitute for moral self-restraint the worship of one's reckless self.

As Paul Elmer More wrote, the central sentence in the whole of Babbitt's writings is this: "The greatest of vices, according to Buddha, is the lazy yielding to the impulses of temperament (*pamãda*); the greatest virtue (*appamãda*) is the opposite awakening from the sloth and lethargy of the senses, the constant exercise of the active will. The last words of the dying Buddha to his disciples were an exhortation to practice this virtue unremittingly." To egoism and appetite, which oppress our time, Babbitt opposed humanism, with its strict ethical disciplines. Humane studies are those which teach a man his dignity and his rights and his duties. They teach him that he is a little lower than the angels, but infinitely higher than the beasts.

In *Democracy and Leadership*, his only directly political book, Irving Babbitt applies these principles of humanism to the civil social order. "He starts from the axiom that man is the measure of all things," Herbert Read wrote in his review, "and is thus led to reject all deterministic philosophies of history, whether it be the older type found in Saint Augustine or Bossuet, which tends to make of man the puppet of God, or the newer type which tends in all its varieties to make of man the puppet of nature." He summarizes the principal political philosophies; contrasts Rousseau with Burke; describes false and true liberals; distinguishes between ethical individualism and destructive egoism; stands up for work and duty—and does much more. But the contents of this

succinct and energetically written book I leave to the reader. It is the labor of a sage—that is, of a man whose moral imagination transcends the neat rules of formal philosophers.

Those who read this sincere and thoughtful book—this book which calls for a democracy of elevation, with just leaders—may find it difficult to understand the fury with which some writers of his time, and later, attacked that kindly big man Irving Babbitt. But as I suggested earlier, some of his more mordant critics may not have read Babbitt at all, really. One such was Ernest Hemingway, who had been told that Babbitt believed in human dignity—as indeed he did believe. Hemingway declared snarlingly that he would like to see how dignified Babbitt would be at the hour of his death, dissolving into slime. Yet as a matter of fact, Babbitt died with high dignity, wasted away by the painful disease of colitis; he continued to meet his Harvard classes, uncomplaining, almost until the day of his death. It was Hemingway, unable to confront the prospect of old age, who died in a very different fashion—by his own hand.

T. S. Eliot, whose early mentor Babbitt had been, wrote several tributes to the great scholar and polemicist. Eliot's chief quarrel with his old master arose out of Eliot's own passage to Christian faith. "We must regret deeply," Eliot wrote in his obituary in *The Criterion,* "that Babbitt's attitude toward Christianity remained, in spite of his sometimes deceptive references to 'religion,' definitely obdurate." But Eliot knew well what he and many others owed to the Humanist leader. "After a life of indefatigable, and for many years almost solitary

struggle," Eliot observed, "he had secured for his views, if not full appreciation, at least wide recognition; he had established a great and beneficent influence, of a kind which has less show than substance, through the many pupils who left him to become teachers throughout America; and he had established a strong counter-current in education." All who had come under his influence, even if they went too far for Babbitt or not far enough, Eliot concluded, would "acknowledge to him a very great debt, and revere his memory in affection, admiration, and gratitude."

Much that Irving Babbitt grimly predicted, in politics and morals and education, has come to pass since 1924, and so some minds have waked today to Babbitt's hard truths. Will and appetite have had their way unchecked in a great part of the world; humanism fights a rearguard action in America; democracy sinks beneath tribulations, and leaders with imagination are few. Whether some humane restoration can be worked may depend upon the existence of a remnant which can understand Babbitt's sentences and endeavor to clothe them with flesh. However that may be, *Democracy and Leadership* remains one of the few truly important works of political thought to be written by an American in the twentieth century—or, for that matter, during the past two centuries. This new edition of an original and resolute book will inform and hearten some readers who—what with nearly all of Babbitt's works being out of print—may have confounded Irving Babbitt with Sinclair Lewis' character George Babbitt. There exists some reason to suspect that the novelist's employment of that particular surname was

malicious; certainly many shafts of malice were directed against a good man and a great teacher.

Yet the troubles of our time fulfill Irving Babbitt's theses; and it seems quite probable that Babbitt's name, contrary to his expectation, may loom large among thinking people in the last two decades of the twentieth century, and longer than that.