

The China Critic

Vol. IV

Shanghai, Thursday, March 12, 1931

No. 11

MUNICIPAL LOANS

BY T. KING

WHAT LIBERALISM MEANS

(THE LITTLE CRITIC)

PROF. TAWNEY'S VISIT

EDITORIAL

PECULIAR JUSTICE IN JAPAN

EDITORIAL

AN AWFUL TEMPTATION

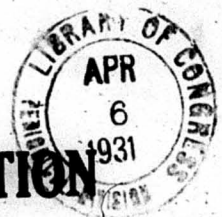
(ARTS & LETTERS)

ANGLO-INDIAN ACCORD

EDITORIAL

中國評論週報

蔡元培題



THE LITTLE CRITIC

EDITED BY LIN YUTANG

What Liberalism Means

The charm of our subject for discussion probably lies in its evasiveness. Liberalism may be taken to apply to any subject and stand for anything. It is so conveniently vague that it has often been safely and complacently appropriated by the most illiberal persons for the most illiberal objects. The criteria by which we judge liberality naturally vary with their bearing upon our selfish interests. But, however vague it is, Liberalism is immensely real. It is one of the few fundamental things we have to reckon with in history. It is the thing which has made for progress and reform in history and which has been responsible for all the advances in thinking counted towards man's credit. At every important step of spiritual progress, the spirit of liberalism is there. And at every step, liberalism had to fight a battle with conservatism, the opposite force in human thinking. At every step, liberalism was denounced as immoral, regarded as an enemy to faith and religion, was persecuted, imprisoned, and somehow died a violent death, in order to revive in the next generation or next century and be hailed as a great moral truth and the pillar to morality and religion. Jesus, the propounder of the liberal truth that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath, was crucified, and then somehow turned out to be the founder of the greatest religion on earth. Socrates, who may be called the first liberator of human thought and critical thinking, drunk hemlock for corrupting the youth of Athens, and then was discovered by the future generations to be after all a very sane and honest moralist. Luther got a reputation for inculcating a loose and licentious view of life and subverting the church, and then turned out to be the emancipator of Europe from mediaeval Christianity. History is full of such instances. Copernicus was imprisoned, and Galileo, if I am not mistaken, had to sign a confession, stating that after all he believed the sun revolved round the earth.

What is, then, Liberalism? To my mind, Liberalism is only an attitude of mind, a way of thinking. It is just that and nothing else. And yet I am going to make clear to you how rare and precious that attitude of mind is, and what an immense importance it possesses for the future of mankind. I am going to show what an unnatural, difficult and often offensive thing Liberalism is, and yet how the very progress of history and the peace of the world depend upon the chance of that unnatural, difficult, and offensive mental attitude to gain foothold among the majority of mankind. Opposed to this liberal attitude is of course the conservative, and often called the die-hard, mental attitude. It would be interesting to show the relation between these two attitudes of mind, and their interaction. It would be

interesting to study how the combination of these two types of thinking influences and controls the greater part of our spiritual history. I will try to show that the die-hard attitude is the passive principle which conserves, and the liberal attitude is the active principle which activates the progress of mankind. I will try to show that the die-hard attitude is always the popular, respectable, and therefore moral attitude, and yet without the active force of liberalism, it must after all remain barren, and in the end, work towards stagnation and decay.

Now, when I speak of the liberal and the die-hard attitude be it understood that this attitude is neither confined to any one nation or any individual. Liberalism is neither here nor there. All of us are die-hards in some things and liberals in others. Take the matter of food prejudices, for example. All of us are more or less die-hards with regard to certain food taboos, and on seeing anything that surpasses our conventional code of eatables, we would all hold up our hands in holy horror. To eat anything outside the conventionally dictated limit is immoral. Thus the English people eat mussels, while the Americans eat clams. It would be as immoral to eat clams in England as it is to eat mussels in America. The French people eat lobsters, and the Chinese eat shrimps. I have met people who are willing to testify to the deliciousness of a well-cooked snake-soup, but for snake-soups, I am as good a die-hard as any European. I am absolutely virtuous on that point. But there are explorers and scientists who are willing to testify to the delicacy of a porcupine steak, without a twinge of conscience. Stefanson, the great explorer, writes in "The Friendly Arctic" that Eskimo dogs raised inland would eat carabou and rabbit, but would not taste seal meat, while those raised near the water would have an exactly opposite conscience in this matter. He also reports that young dogs overcome such food prejudices more easily than old dogs. We may say therefore that the young Eskimo dogs are comparative liberals, while the old Eskimo dogs are comparative die-hards.

Again we are such fine die-hards in the matter of women's dress that we draw a line of morality and immorality between three to four centimetres in the length of women's skirts, and it has taken almost a century to reveal to us the truth that the knee is more beautiful than the ankle. In this regard, our Parisian modistes are the liberals and the liberators, while our grannies who fight for the extra three or four centimetres may be called the die-hards. And so on, it goes through life.

Let me begin the comparison of the liberal and the die-hard attitude by pointing out a point of similarity. I have said that liberalism is nothing but an attitude, but so is die-hardism. It is the attitude that matters. The English or French die-hard and the Chinese die-hard may take entirely opposite positions and fight each

other tooth and nail. But, after all, the English die-hard and the Chinese die-hard are very much the same thing, because their attitudes towards problems are so identical. Let us take, for example, Mr. Rodney Gilbert, author of "What's Wrong with China?" as a fair example of the English die-hard, and a Chinese who is fond of shouting "Down with Imperialism;" and "Drive Out the Straight-Legged-Devil" as a fair example of the Chinese die-hard. They seem to hold opposite theses. And yet, I have no doubt, the Chinese who can shout "Drive Out the Straight-Legged Devil" would write in the same strain as Rodney Gilbert, were he born an English writer, and were Mr. Rodney Gilbert, born a Chinese, he would be the first to shout "Down with Imperialism". In other words, they are different versions of the same article. The same thing is true of liberalism. Mr. Bertrand Russell may be taken as good example of an English liberal, and Dr. Hu Shih may stand for a good Chinese liberal. And yet, we are quite sure, were Mr. Bertrand Russell born a modern Chinese, he would be as critical of Chinese culture as he is today appreciative of it as an Englishman. Were Dr. Hu Shih born an Englishman and should he make his trip to the Orient as Mr. Bertrand Russell did, he would be as appreciative of Chinese culture as he is critical of it as a Chinese today. In both cases, the actual positions regarding certain problems are unimportant: the attitude, liberal or conservative, is the determining factor.

Now we may go on for a comparison of the two ways of thinking, I am afraid to the great disadvantage of the liberals. In the first place, die-hardism is popular but liberalism is not. The die-hards constitute the overwhelming majority of mankind, while the liberals are the unimportant minority. To say that ninety-five per cent. of the people are natural die-hards would be to put the figure too low. I think there is no better description of the die-hard in us than that of Shakespeare:

Could great men thunder
As Jove himself does, Jove would ne'er be quiet,
For every pelting, petty officer
Would use his heaven for thunder;
Nothing but thunder . . .

. . . . Man, proud man,
Drest in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the angels weep; who, with our spleens
Would all themselves laugh mortal.

Most of us would use our heaven for thunder—and most of us are "most ignorant of what we are most assured." Most of us believe that our own country is the best, our morals the highest and our religion the purest.

In the second place, while die-hardism is natural and has a biologic sanction, liberalism seems but an unnatural product of a late age. Die-hardism is natural, first because all animals are die-hards. Some one has said that "all animals die a tragic death." Only human beings die ingloriously in their beds. There is something fine and robust and strong about dying hard in the last trench, instead of trying to yield to your opponent with sympathetic understanding and seeing the other man's point of view. Again, die-hardism is natural because it has all the savage herd-instincts behind it. The die-hard mind which opposes all change and which regards all foreigners as tribal enemies is a relic and a survival of the savage mind. All savages are die-hards. The savage mind is distinguished by fear of novelty, respect for social taboos, love of endless, meaningless routine, and the greatest abhorrence of changes. The race prejudices of the modern man are nothing but the survival of the savage herd-instinct. For what, after all, are race prejudices? They are simply the avowal that our own customs are the best, our religion the highest and our manners the most refined, and that all foreign customs and foreign habits are hateful to look at. The new liberal attitude of trying to see some sense instead of nonsense in the foreigner's customs laws and religion is such a belated development in history that it has very little biologic basis. There is simply no natural instinct to support it. It is only with right education, immense tolerance and an extreme effort of the mind that a man may finally bring himself to take a liberal attitude towards the habits of the foreigner.

In the third place, die-hardism is healthy, comfortable and hygienic, while liberalism is naturally associated with mental discomfort, worries and twinges of the conscience. In fact, I have so much faith in the tonic properties of die-hardism that I would recommend some of the American correspondence schools for personal efficiency to include it as a first principle in their psychology of success. There is satisfaction in the thought that your nation is the greatest on earth and that you happen to be born in a religious sect which keeps custody of all the human and divine truths of the universe. He who would go out and lead an efficient day's life must begin his day by reminding himself along with his morning coffee that when I go to heaven, there is a special reserved seat. There should be no twinges of conscience. Somebody (I think it was Lord Birkenhead) made what is popularly considered a brilliant definition of the die-hard, by saying that "A die-hard is a man who refuses to compromise with his conscience." A conscience prevents a man from dying hard by taking away all the courage of his convictions.

In the fourth place, die-hardism is moral, respectable and patriotic, while liberalism is offensive, degrading and unpatriotic. Liberalism is always offensive to the public good taste, and all great liberals of history are great nuisances. The herd instinct of the Jewish scribes

did right to do away with Jesus, and the herd instinct of the Athenian populace did right also to do away with Socrates.

To sum up, therefore, die-hardism is popular, while liberalism is not. Die-hardism has a biologic basis, while liberalism is a late development of the human mind without the backing of instincts. Die-hardism is natural, while liberalism is something of a human perversity. Die-hardism is pleasant, comfortable and healthy, while liberalism is associated with twinges of conscience. Finally, die-hardism is moral and patriotic and eminently respectable, while liberalism is immoral, degrading and offensive to public good taste. For all these reasons, liberalism is generally difficult of attainment. For all these reasons, liberalism in history has always been the beginning of a movement which ends up by being illiberal. Jesus, the young radical who went into the Temple at Jerusalem and overthrew the money-changers' tables, became in two thousand years the God of Bishop Manning who employed plain-clothes detectives to eject Judge Lindsey from St. John's Cathedral, without giving the latter a chance for self-defense. Luther, who championed offensive Protestantism, became the founder of the largest modern church, which is divided against itself into two or three hundred sects. Such is always the fate of a liberal movement: first it was hounded and persecuted, after a while, it became respectable, and finally it ended up by being the shelter-house beneath which all the die-hard animals herd together and laugh at all those outside the fold.

And yet, let me point out the supremely important function of this unnatural, difficult and offensive attitude of mind in the modern world. Cosmopolitanism has arrived whether we will it or not. The radio, the aeroplane, the automobile and television are all bringing the world closer together. You will have to see more of your "foreign devils," whether you will it or not. As John Meynard puts it: The inhabitant of Lond-

on could order by telephone, sipping his morning tea in bed, the various products of the whole earth, in such as he might see it, and reasonably expect their early delivery upon his doorstep; he could at the same moment and, by the same means, adventure his wealth in the natural resources and new enterprises of any quarter of the world, and share, without exertion or trouble, in their prospective fruits and advantages . . . He could secure forthwith, if he wished it, cheap and comfortable means of transit to any country without passport or other formality, could despatch his servant to the neighbouring office of a bank for supply of the precious metals as might seem convenient, and could then proceed abroad to foreign quarters, without knowledge of their religion, or customs, bearing coined wealth upon his person, and would consider himself greatly aggrieved and much surprised at the least interference."

Such is the condition we have arrived at, in any country, in any part of the world. Modern scientific civilization has brought about a material intellectual attitude to meet it. This cosmopolitanism is, I am afraid, largely a one-legged development. Material cosmopolitanism is so far largely a rich man's cosmopolitanism. Very soon, it will also become the poor man's cosmopolitanism. But whether it be rich man's or poor man's cosmopolitanism, there is urgent need of a corresponding growth of the liberal attitude of mind, and a more intelligently guided control of the surviving savage herd instinct. We may not be willing to admit it, but this is the teaching of modern psychology, that while our material civilization has progressed by leaps and bounds beyond the original tribal groups, our actions and behaviour are still largely dictated unconsciously by ways of thinking, taboos, fears, and repressions characteristic of the savage mind. There is therefore a great need for our consciously inculcating this new attitude of mind and thus meeting the evident discrepancy between our material conquests and our mental equipments.

L. Y.

*For greater savings, make
it a point to shop at*

THE SINCERE'S.

560 NANKING ROAD, SHANGHAI

