

THE SHADOW WORLD OF THURMAN ARNOLD

By MAX LERNER †

I. LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGIST

THURMAN ARNOLD'S new book* has received so much acclaim that the task of a reviewer now is no longer to recommend it for its wit and novelty, but to probe its weakness as well as its strength, and seek to place it in American social thought. It has been compared, with reviewers' exuberance, to the great ones of the earth—to Machiavelli, Darwin, Marx, Bentham, Veblen. It has also been dismissed, typically, by Mr. Henry Hazlitt in the *New York Times*, as a set of bad jokes on capitalism or (what is evidently even worse) an *apologia* for the New Deal. Clearly it is none of these things, nor even what the author himself would have us believe—a detached and impersonal dissection of capitalism. It is a spirited foray into our current ways of thinking, written with wit and acumen, and containing a social philosophy which the reader will discover if he doesn't get too distracted by all the signs labelled "Laboratory" with which the author has cluttered up the place.

I am frankly sceptical when people working on the study of societies begin arming themselves with scalpels, slide-rules and test-tubes. For they are promising more than they can possibly fulfill. The protestations of complete objectivity that we have been hearing from students of society in the past quarter century take on a religious note: it is as if they were washing themselves in the blood of the scientific lamb. That is why I feel disturbed when I find as sensible a person as Thurman Arnold talking in terms of the laboratory and the dissecting room, and making them—in his reaction against "ideals" and "inspirational philosophies"—his protective symbols. I suspect that Arnold assumes his attitude of "detachment" mainly as a literary device. For he must know that the realm of society cannot be chartered with the inhuman precision that we apply to physics or chemistry or astronomy. It is capable at best only of the sort of scientific humanism that is involved in clear thinking and factual knowledge, such as Lancelot Hogben has recently called for in his *Retreat from Reason*.

†Editor, THE NATION.

**The Folklore of Capitalism* (1937).

It is as a prelude to such a scientific humanism that Arnold's book is chiefly valuable. It belongs in the category of corrosive books, which eat away the past complacencies, without the removal of which future constructions are impossible. It is in that sense part of a pre-revolutionary era. For the significant literature in a time of social tension such as ours falls into three categories. One is the literature of social protest. The second is the literature of salvation, of "the way out," ranging from the great revolutionary proposals, through ingenious devisings, to messianic or merely crotchety schemes. The third is the literature of corrosive "detachment," whether critically contemplative or satiric. And it is of this third category that I want to speak.

Its habitat — like that of its dry-as-dust brother, "sound" orthodox thought — is often the university, but more often the modest quarters of the free-lance writer. But in either case its habits are prowling and destructive. It is given to preying on the substantial citizenry of the intellectual world, counting everything fair game that is smug, stuffy, traditional, obese. The writers in this category do not wholly escape the contagion of protest or salvation, since the one is needed as an impulsion to analysis and the second is the inescapable sequel of it. Yet their weight is not thrown on these. Their thrust is always at the underlying assumptions of a social order — questioning, assaying, mocking if the mood to mock is on them, but always undercutting the accepted first principles and tabus of their society. They are the sappers and miners of a social order; dangerous men because they belong to the breed of anthropologists, and anthropologists are always more dangerous when they study their own culture than when they dose themselves with quinine and deck themselves out in mosquito netting to study a savage culture. If the anthropologists who study primitive tribes are the forerunners of missionaries and traders, those who turn to their own cultures are the forerunners of revolutionists.

I have only to mention a few names and books of the past to convey the importance of this sort of writer, whom I should call a literary anthropologist. Think of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique*, of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, of Nietzsche's *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, of Sorel's *Reflexions sur la violence*, of Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. What all of them have in common is a capacity, through a heroic effort of the imagination, to stand aside from one's own culture and examine it with a devastating effect. Their anthropological attitude is a literary, not a scientific device — but it is none the less effective.

These books are epoch-making, as Arnold's is unlikely to be, because it lacks both their clarity and their depth. But their mood is his mood, as it is also the mood of such contemporary books as James Harvey Robinson's *Mind in the Making*, William Bolitho's *Camera Obscura*,

Karl Mannheim's *Ideologie und Utopie*, the Lynds' two books on *Middletown*, Stuart Chase's *Tyranny of Words*. All of them involve turning the searchlight on the basic institutions, premises and attitudes of our own culture. And it is with this company that Thurman Arnold belongs. He brings into their midst a verve, an exuberance, a sharpness of intuition, a histrionic capacity that give him a quality of distinctiveness even when his ideas are not markedly different from the rest.

II. BY WAY OF SUMMARY

I want to set down what I take to be the argument of Arnold's essay in the anthropology of our contemporary attitudes. It is not clearly articulated or logically presented, any more than is one of his speeches. Samuel Johnson once said of *Clarissa Harlow* that if you read it for the plot you will hang yourself first. Much the same may be said of the *Folklore of Capitalism*. The book grows not by a sequence of syllogisms, but by an aggregation of examples. And yet I think that some of the reviewers, in emphasizing its chaos, have done less than justice to a certain structure it possesses. As I read it, it falls into four parts. The first (chapters 1 and 2) is an introductory statement of the author's approach; the second (chapters 3-7) discusses the prevailing academic folklore in economics, and contrasts "polar" thinking with that of the "fact-minded observer;" the third, the heart of the book (chapters 9-12), discusses in concrete terms five phases of our economic and legal folklore, being principally popular opinion about corporations and the government; the fourth (chapters 13 and 14) represents a bold attempt on the author's part to outline his own "principles of political dynamics."

From all these one can extract a certain point of view about society. In trying to set it down, I shall incur the risk of setting down not only what I have read in Arnold but also what I have read into him. But since much of the effectiveness of the book lies in its marginal suggestiveness, the risk is worth taking.

Arnold considers most social thinking, along with much of social activity, as ritualistic. Its function, that is to say, is not that of the laboratory but that of the theater, not description but consolation. Arnold implies — although it would be better if he said it clearly — that most of us dare not face the Medusa-head of social reality: it would turn us to stone. Nevertheless, there is in us somewhere a drive to make sense of our experience, even though that experience is a welter of nonsense. And because, along with all the irrational impulses on which our behavior is actually based, we have this desire for making rational order out of our chaos, we build elaborate structures of rationalization that we call legal and economic thinking. These structures are our ideals, our folklore. They are called "sound thinking." They are cast in an abstract

form by our university professors; they find their way into current popular thinking as unanalyzed assumptions, through the ministrations of columnists, editors, and professional oracles. What these two groups, academic and non-academic alike, have in common is that they are the high priests, the shamans, the ritual-makers of the tribe — the fashioners of the tribal folklore. This folklore, or ritual, finds its way down from the basic social organization of government and business, into the whole set of institutions and social organizations in which we live — the family, the church, the club, the school, so that they all take on the same symbolism and the same pattern of “sound ideas.”

The function of folklore is, for the individual, consolation: to be shored against the advancing tides of reality by ideals one may cling to; for the group as a whole it is social cohesion and a sense of unity. But actually there is no correspondence between the ideal formulations and the actual practices in business — no correspondence, that is, between the folklore of capitalism and capitalism itself. Our folklore is a body of slogans and symbols intended as a form of social therapy. They are healing and consoling to us, because it would be intolerable to all our impulses and traditions to allow the practices of capitalism to continue if we understood their naked meaning. So we interpose between ourselves and the real world certain “little pictures” (what ingenuous effectiveness in that adjective!) of the world, in the form of ideas and ideals — neat, tidy, trim, and simply not true. All of us have our varying sets of pictures, and the difference between liberal, reactionary and radical is the difference between the pictures that obscure their vision of reality. But all the pictures are neat, and all of them posit a “thinking man” who is far less irrational than men actually are, and who will somehow make a deliberate choice between systems of social organization.

Having come to reality with our pictures, we come away again with them and nothing else. We have not seen anything because we have rejected everything in the real world that did not conform to our pictures. The result is that we see the economic system, which actually operates as a far-flung army of industrial organization, penetrating and occupying every nook of our lives, as an assemblage of hucksters in the market-place of an economy of petty trade. We see the huge corporations, which dominate our lives, as persons whose privileged position must be protected by the courts against government and labor, much as might the civil liberties of an individual. Where the landscape is filled with looming monopolies, growing out of the compulsives of the new technology, we talk of enforcing the anti-trust laws, and we content ourselves with such talk because it will not interfere with the onward thrust of the monopolies. When the government seeks to recognize the compulsives of technology, and supply the people with light, with power, with housing, with credit, we cry out that this is tyranny. The

reason is that we associate the government with the symbol of taxation, and what we pay as consumers for its services seems to us in the nature of forced contributions. But when the corporations extract the same levies from us — or even more — in the form of inflated prices for their products, we do not think of it as taxation; we think of ourselves as protected by an automatic price mechanism even where it does not exist. And when the inefficiency and depredations of the big corporation have gone too far, and it breaks down under its own weight, our folklore helps it rebuild itself. We construct a ritual of corporate reorganization, highly stylized like a Chinese play — a mysterious texture of law and economics, which is used as a screen behind which debts are written off, shrewd horse-trading goes on, and all sorts of financial juggling is accomplished. And when this vicarious atonement for past sins has been complied with, the corporation is ready to proceed with further depredations — that is, with business as usual.

Thus does the shadow-world of symbols mediate between our lingering illusions and the advancing world of reality. Arnold sees the whole process of government and society as a dramatic spectacle with a religious theme — a miracle play with devils, angels, and gods. He has a healthy contempt for our professional spokesmen — radicals, liberals and conservatives alike. But especially for liberals: for he sees them as obsessed with their abstract ideals, so sunk in the ceremonial of logical consistency that they would rather lose out in the struggle for power than deviate in the slightest degree from the proper ceremonial. They are like the king of France whom Veblen describes in the second chapter of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, who was burned to death because the proper functionary was lacking to move him from the fire. But, Arnold concludes, there is an art of political dynamics which deals with organization while it takes account of ceremonial. Its prime purpose is not the construction of logical systems but the building of effective social organizations. And for that task one must have not the weaver of eternal verities but the skilled and slightly cynical compromiser.

III. THE HEAVEN OF REALISM

Arnold has put his own personal stamp on his book. He has written it with such vividness that no one who writes either of capitalism or of symbolism from now on will write the same for the fact that this book has been written. In an age of timidity, he dares to be himself. His flashes of wit and paradox are being worn thin as they pass current in dinner-table conversation among the intellectual *elite*. When that happens to a book, its real meaning is likely to be narrowed down to a particular angle of refraction that has caught the popular eye. This chances to be the joyousness with which Arnold deflates the current gas-bags, and

the abandon with which he lays about with his cudgel thwackingly and resoundingly.

Yet no man spins a book purely out of his own innards. If this one is important, it is because it comes out of the main streams of American thought today. And, as with most books that achieve popularity, its deeper appeal lies not in its originality but in the sharpness with which it says what others have been trying to say for some time, and what they have therefore prepared us to listen to. A popular writer is one who passes with flair and resplendence along a way already beaten out for him, while an original writer must too often prepare the road along which he will eventually be met.

Arnold stands at the crossing of four strains in our thought, all of them characteristically American: first, "common-sense" *realism*; second, *psychologism* as applied to political man, with its overtones of anti-rationalism and anti-intellectualism; third, *institutionalism* in economics and social theory; fourth, *middle-class radicalism* in program and tactics. I want to consider each of these in the sections that follow.

It is the realist's boast and fond dream that he is, in William James's phrase, tough-minded rather than tender-minded. There are few contemporaries that exceed Arnold in striving for toughness. And this takes most characteristically the form of an anti-conceptualism. I have said elsewhere¹ that he observes our social attitudes with the detachment and lively curiosity of an ethnologist watching a ceremonial dance among the Hopi Indians. This is undoubtedly the effect he intends. But on reflection I want to qualify the comparison. For Arnold has more at stake in his observations than the ethnologist has. There is an animus with which he starts — an animus against all intellectual constructs and a contempt for the virtues of logical consistency, an animus which does much to give his writing its quality of irony and irreverence. He is always — in his first book² as well as the present one — concerned with the illogic of logical thinking, the unreality of abstract principles, the futility of intellectual system-building.

As I understand it, this is one of the oldest and newest themes in the history of thought. For all the fervor with which Arnold clothes his assaults, there have been Prometheans before who have raged against the vested interests of the reigning intellectual divinities. He has chosen to tackle one of the most persistent problems in the realm of thinking — the problem of illusion and reality, of certitude in our minds and change in the world outside of them, of intellectual structures and functioning social organizations, of hierarchies of moral values and the twisting elusive thing that we call social fact — in short, of the reality of

1. *Capitalism as Magic*, 146 NATION 46, 7 (Jan. 8, 1938).

2. THE SYMBOLS OF GOVERNMENT (1937).

the world and our apprehension of it. I suspect that Arnold will not enjoy my saying that the question he is absorbed with was once the deep concern of the mediaeval Schoolmen. It furnished the core of the struggle between the Realists and the Nominalists, and was the essence of the "battle of the universals." For the mediaevals too were concerned with the question whether the concepts that we use for the generalizations in our thinking are only convenient and fictitious labels, or whether they have a real existence apart from the particulars in which they appear. I need scarcely add that the Nominalists in the Middle Ages took the position that Arnold and the realists take today, and that this position distressed Church and State no end. For it robbed both of them of their most secure claim to allegiance — their claim to a continuous and universal existence. It reduced Church and State to mere bundles of human beings, building institutions useful for the purposes of the day, but giving way to other institutions when their utility was ended. And the authoritarians of the day sought to demolish this heresy, much as the Hutchinses and Adlers at Chicago today — Realists in the mediaeval sense — regard the heresies of Thurman Arnold as dangerous.³

I have gone to some length to point this out because I believe in the continuity of western culture, and I feel it is a mistake to truncate ourselves too sharply from our past. We shall never escape the lot of dealing with age-old problems, and our only hope is to deal with them in a fresh way. But I fear that many of Arnold's successes in demolishing concepts are set-ups, achieved by premising the hollowness of all concepts. We make a drastic error if, in fighting certain over-artificial intellectual constructs, we forget that we can fight them only with other intellectual constructs, not with bare knuckles and mother wit.

Arnold has done an exhilarating job in knocking the stuffing out of all sorts of saw-dust laden minds. For that, all honor to him. But he is doing us a disservice by his fierce atomism — by implying, as his book seems to, that all rational and conceptual thinking necessarily consists of sawdust, or even that its main effect is to hamper social constructions. For he must know what immense new constructions of the western world stem directly from the rational systems of the English seventeenth century political theorists and the French eighteenth century *philosophes*. He must know that the new social organizations of the fascist states — whatever we may think of them — derive largely from the writings of Nietzsche, Bergson, Spengler, Sorel and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and that Hitler's foreign policy, step by step, may be found charted out in the pages of *Mein Kampf*. He must know that the social construc-

3. John Chamberlain reports that Hutchins remarked to him: "Yes, Thurman Arnold is unique. So is a rattlesnake unique." I fear that in both cases he was doing an injustice to his own Realist mediaeval doctrine. See Chamberlain, *The Folklore of Reviewers*, SATURDAY REV. OF LIT., March 12, 1938.

tions of the future cannot help owing a great deal to the logical system-building of Marx and Engels. Actually Arnold disproves his own thesis. For after a scathing attack on "abstract ideals" and logical systems, he devotes his last two chapters to "the social philosophy of tomorrow," and "some principles of political dynamics." Clearly the other fellow's "abstract ideals" become one's own "principles of political dynamics." And thus the intellectual constructs that have been thrown out of the window come back by the kitchen door.

Along with a fierce atomism, there is in Arnold a fierce pragmatism. He wants to know what things work or fail to work in society, why certain programs succeed while others fail, what stands in the way between social thinking and social effectiveness, what are the rules of action for the men and groups who win out in the fierce struggle for a place in the sun. He is not content with thrashing over the dry straw of other men's intellectual disputes. His concern is with what works as against what is only logically consistent — a concern possible only in an age in which the rational technology of industry has yielded place to the manipulations of corporate finance, the propaganda machines of nations in mortal combat, the power-diplomacy of fascist adventurers. And I suspect that in this contempt for the geometry of reason and in his fervor for the instrumentalisms of the contemporary world, Arnold is not merely expressing some personal experience of disillusionment. He sums up tragically the consciousness of a generation which thinks that the social good which it has failed to achieve by rational effort can be won by being fragmentized and pursued with a desperate immediacy.

I think I can understand Arnold and sympathize with his animus, because I belong to the same desperate generation. Nevertheless I cannot find any comfort in a heaven of realism from which, because concepts have grown old and stuffy or been captured by the enemy, we would eject all concepts — even those that are necessary to defeat the enemy or give meaning to life. I know that Arnold will say at this point that the terms "enemy," "meaning," betray me, for they are in his terminology "polar words" and as such have no place in the vocabulary of "the fact-minded observer." But one of the revealing things about his book is this very insistence not only on distinguishing between observation and value-judgments, but on excluding all values from his system. What would be left if he succeeded in doing this — which, of course, he does not — would be a chaos of atomistic "facts," unrelated and meaningless, powerless even to cluster themselves into those "principles of political dynamics" upon which Arnold is finally thrust back. Like Satan who carried Hell with him wherever he went, Arnold cannot escape the abstraction. The "fact-minded observer" is himself an "abstract ideal," a "polar word," a fictitious refuge from Arnold's own passionate fear of values. So also is his other favorite, the "organizing

man." By the realism which refuses to face the need for abstractions, Arnold succeeds only in admitting them by inadvertence and thus becomes the more readily their victim.

My guess is that Arnold's fierceness against concepts comes chiefly from his training in law. It is in law that concepts, long after their vitality is gone, linger on as fictions and rituals. And it has become the tradition of the school of legal realists to aim their sharpest javelin thrusts against the rituals and formalizations of the law. The realist believes that there is something more "real" than these rituals, and he goes off in pursuit of that something. The interesting thing about Arnold, on the contrary, is that he finds the real meaning and force in the law exactly in the ritual itself. For he sees that the ritual holds a subjective sway over men's minds, largely because of its correspondence with their desire for the dramatic and the symbolic. I think it may be said that the school of legal realism has two divisions. Both start with the discrepancies between our pictures of the law ("the law in books," etc.) and the law as it is ("the law in action"). But one branches off to concentrate on examining the latter, while the second, including Arnold — through the fascination that symbols hold for him — is mainly interested in the former.

Let us follow him into his world of symbols and myths. For if there is anything to bolster his uncompromising realism, we must seek it in the picture he draws of psychological chaos in human beings.

IV. THE DANCE OF THE SYMBOLS

I have dealt in the last section with the over-rationality (in Arnold's scheme) of legal ritual and other symbolic constructs. I want to deal now with the under-rationality, or irrationality, of the minds on which those symbols impinge. Arnold has been deeply affected by the psychologism of modern thought. He learned much from contact with the restless and pioneering mind of Edward S. Robinson, with whom he collaborated in a seminar on law and psychology. But his handling of the psychological schools is still that of the brilliant amateur. One finds in the present book a measure of behaviorism, a dash of *Gestaltism*, a bowing acquaintance with the experimental techniques, a large admixture of psychoanalysis and psychiatry of various brands, and a liberal dose of the social psychology of crowds. The result is a generous eclecticism which, while it may bewilder or even appall the reader, produces at least an intense intellectual ferment.

What these various psychologies finally boil down to as a residue is the complete and utter irrationalism of man as a political animal. Just as he has a dislike for concepts, so Arnold has a distrust of reason. The "reasonable man" or the "thinking man" is one of his dearest objects

of ridicule. Through the entire book Arnold parades man as exactly the opposite — incapable of grasping more than the stereotypes of politics, hungry for drama and display, ridden by myths which he is incapable of examining in any critical fashion, narcissist in his desire to dress himself up in various roles and parade through his own imagination, incapable of creating except through great leaders and organizers, herd-like in following the leader's aim and the mass emotion. I do not believe I have overdrawn the picture, which I have had to piece together from various parts of the book.

Clearly such a psychological conception is a sharp instrument for puncturing many pretensions, effective in probing for obscure motivations and for uncovering hidden ideologies. Arnold sees politics, in a sense, as a histrionic release from the intolerable burden of having to live and think like rational creatures on the basis of an irrational psychic endowment. It is this fault-line between the pretensions of rationality and the facts of irrationality that does much to give the book what elements it possesses of high farce. For in the most serious sense, such a confronting of discrepancies is an exploration of the comic. What a Teutonic scholar like Mannheim⁴ does in a lumbering way to uncover and lay bare the thrusts of impulse and interest behind the formal edifices of reasoning, Arnold accomplishes with wit and *esprit*, if with a good deal less of method. What the Marxians do to economic interests on the assumption that man is a rational animal, Arnold does to the Marxians and other system-builders on the assumption that man is quite irrational. And as for the unveiling of the hypocrisies, the blind aimlessness, the feckless shams of business practises, no one since Veblen has done it with as savage a gusto or as devastating an effect.

But granted these rich values, Arnold's method and conception have their grave limitations. The first lies in the use of the symbolic instrument itself. Arnold fails to differentiate between the levels of symbolism. There are symbols that are merely abbreviations, without which life would grow too complex for survival. There are also symbols that are short-cuts to emotion, ways of revealing or obscuring the meaning of society. There are symbols by which some men achieve and maintain a hold over the rest of mankind. There are finally, as Arnold might have learned from Whitehead,⁵ whole symbol-clusters that are evocative ways of thought and patterns of life. Man as we find him is irrational enough; but Arnold adds to this irrationality by attributing the distorting effects of symbolism even to the situations where symbols alone give life meaning and where they clear the path for, instead of blocking, social construction. He lumps all the symbolisms of men's actions together, with-

4. MANNHEIM, *IDEOLOGY AND UTOPIA* (1936).

5. WHITEHEAD, *SYMBOLISM: ITS MEANING AND EFFECT*, 196.

out getting at the purposes of those actions, without getting at the *for whats?* An irrational symbol for one purpose may be a perfectly rational symbol for another. It is Arnold's incapacity to say *for what?* to his symbols that is at the root of much of the book's confusion. When you see everything as undifferentiated symbols, then the symbol ceases to have meaning, but takes its place only as a senseless particle in a mad dance.

The second difficulty however lies in the anti-intellectualism and anti-rationalism toward which Arnold's position inclines him. I say "inclines" because Arnold may well answer that he is not necessarily anti-anything, whether rationalism or irrationalism — that he is merely describing men as irrational. That is strictly true. Yet with only a limited number of conceptions of man's rationality available, the one you choose for describing the world is also the one you use for evaluating it. And Arnold is throughout the book betraying his scheme of valuation. He depicts thinkers as stumbling along ineffectually while the decisions of the world are left to men of little logic and ruthless purpose. The intellectual, in the book, is always flouted in favor of the hard-boiled practical politician and the organizing genius. Arnold displays a faith in the latter almost akin to the sentiment the eighteenth century felt for the Noble Savage. And as a corollary to the esteem he feels for the big doers, and the leaning toward the great-man conception of the historic process, there is a tendency toward anti-massism in the book. After expanding on the irrational blunderings, hypocrisies, slavishnesses of most men, Arnold singles out as the agents of social construction "men without moral illusion who are able to create great organizations through the sheer use of power." He has in mind, in this context and others, men like Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller, John L. Lewis.

Arnold is motivated, I suspect, by a reaction against the centuries of reason, much like his animus against abstract ideals. He is disillusioned about them. If one understands that disillusionment, one understands also the climate of opinion in which the luxuriant growths of recent irrational philosophies have sprung up and the quest of symbols has flourished. Take a generation which intellectually spans the post-War and post-Depression period, both of them filled with hypocrisies which have made the most significant American expressions of our time "Oh yeah?" and "it's a racket." What such a generation tends to develop is not so much a philosophy as a reaction against the intolerable humiliation of having been "let down." Out of this comes the impulse toward "debunking" — the inevitable sequel of a sharp disenchantment with once cherished values. The most important influences in the thinking of this generation have been the experience with war propaganda and the study of the techniques that the fascist and communist movements have used in manipulating the effective symbols for mass persuasion, both separ-

ately and in their mutual conflict. The effect of these influences on our political and psychological thinking can scarcely be overestimated. They are comparable to the effect of capitalist collapse upon our economic thinking.

Given this climate of opinion, it explains but does not validate the anti-rationalism of Arnold. For in his reaction against the centuries of the great hope, he fails to see the strides that men have made through their tireless perfection of what little wit nature has given them. Despite his exaggerated use of the symbolism of the laboratory in his own behalf, Arnold is very grudging toward science. He fails to see that men have moved forward through the rational thinking about themselves and their world which is science, technology, social science. While science may be a symbol, it is also an objective fact in human history. And unless men can learn how to use this symbol, or fact, for new social constructions and for the creation of new symbolisms, they may well end up not in the relative decency that Arnold in his final chapters foresees for them, but in complete barbarism.

There is a curious blindness in the book with respect to the potential value of revolutionary and reconstructive symbolism. Arnold does not distinguish between the folklore that challenges the *status quo* and the folklore that hems in and defends it. The only emerging philosophies that he alludes to are those of the New Deal and the nationalist dictatorships, but they are all lumped in their treatment with the philosophy of present-day capitalism. Yet the revolutionary philosophies are completely different in their class base, their purposes, the resources of social power they bring to their support.

V. INSTITUTIONS AND LAG

There can be no analysis of folklore without an analysis of the social structures from which it grows, no theory of capitalism without a theory of institutions. In his discussion of capitalism, Arnold follows in general the lead of the institutional economists. Among them he seems to have been most deeply influenced by Thorstein Veblen, Walton Hamilton, and A. A. Berle and Gardiner Means. It is not surprising that he should cultivate their company, for the essence of institutional economics is revolt against the too austere and abstract formulations of the classical Old Masters. And in its revolt, it succeeds also in breaking down economics itself as a category so that it becomes merely the most significant point at which law, custom, technology, psychology, and property relations meet and cross.

In such an economics, Thurman Arnold is clearly as happy as a professorial cow that has kicked down the fences and found succulent pastures to roam in. It is where law meets economics, rather than where

law meets psychology or metaphysics, that Arnold finds the best grazing and the greatest felicity. His most masterly chapter is easily, and by a quite general accord, the one on *The Ritual of Corporate Reorganization*. Those on taxation and the anti-trust laws are runners-up in interest. He is at his best when he is dealing with operative legal and economic techniques, and never so effective as when the ostensible purpose of the techniques is far removed from their actual function.

For Arnold's most fruitful thinking is based on the lag. That is one reason among many good ones why he will never be a Marxian. For Marxian social thought is built on the conditioning relationships between the several parts of a hierarchy—between the material base, the class structure, the secondary social structures, the idea systems of a society—and on the laws of movement and change from one hierarchy to another in time. Institutional thought, on the other hand, is built on the distances or lags between the various elements in a social complex. And Arnold glories in the lag. He approaches a problem at the point where he can find the most striking discrepancy between the going technology and the pace of industrial change on the one hand, and, on the other, the legal rituals and popular symbols through or despite which the technology is finally translated into consumable goods. What interests him, in short, is the distance that separates economic reality from economic and legal opinion and emotion. That distance is spanned by the folklore of a culture.

But more than with the lag itself, Arnold is concerned with the mechanism by which men are kept more or less unconscious of its existence, and the mechanism by which the fact of the lag facilitates a rough adjustment to an imperfect world. Let me illustrate by Arnold's chapter on the anti-trust laws. The economic reality is the large-scale industrial technique, demanding large-scale methods of distribution. The lag is the distance that separates such a technique and its demands from the prevailing economic opinion favoring the small productive unit and the competitive market. The mechanism of the anti-trust laws, says Arnold, satisfies our ideal of the preservation of competition; at the same time it also satisfies the compulsives of the industrial techniques. It can do both by the fact of being on the statute books and being the subject of a vigorous campaign, yet remaining essentially unenforced because of the enormous difficulty of enforcement and the clumsiness of the machinery. Our censor is, so to speak, lulled into unawareness of the continued existence of the lag; and under cover of that unawareness, business enterprise is built up to monopoly form, and a rough adjustment is made to the compulsives of the new techniques.

Arnold's theory is neat. But it has several difficulties. One is that there is nothing in it that indicates why the lag arises in the first place. The second is, that it does not indicate why, having arisen, the lag is

maintained, and why it is not resolved. The third is that when the theorist turns actor, the theory has to be tempered.

Arnold does not explain why the lag arises, because his theory does not carry him beyond a certain static quality in opinion which does not allow it to keep pace with the pace of social change. Yet the fact of the inertia of ideas is not enough, for ideas do change—often at a revolutionary pace—when the conditions are right for change. What is needed in addition is a theory of vested interests and vested ideas, which puts a premium on conformity in thought even while it places a similar premium upon advance in technology. And once the lag arises, it is maintained for the same essential reason. It continues because the machinery of political power and the control over the channels for forming public opinion are in the hands of the group that wants monopoly and sees that it can best achieve it by maintaining the fiction of competitive units in a petty economy. In short, the changes in technology are not translated into corresponding changes in property relations or the relations of class power—*i.e.*, not translated into corresponding institutional change.

I have said that when the theorist finally turns actor, the theory has to be tempered. But that will best introduce another phase of Arnold's thought.

VI. TACTIC—FOR WHAT?

As I write, the United States Senate, through a sub-committee of its Committee on the Judiciary, has just had a tussle with the meaning of Professor Arnold's book and the validity of his thinking. Book and author have thus far come out on top, but I ask myself whether it is not a Pyrrhic victory. Arnold got the recommendation confirming his appointment, but I am half-inclined to the view that he left his theory behind on the field of battle.

By one of those ironic twists of fate, Arnold was nominated to be Assistant Attorney General in charge of anti-trust law enforcement, to succeed Robert H. Jackson.⁶ With a coolness that does justice to his courage, he accepted the nomination, and faced Senator Borah, whom he had in his book called (in effect) the high-priest of the folklore of the anti-trust laws. The newspapers were quick to see an opportunity for exploiting some of their own folklore, and making some anti-New Deal capital, and for several days the editorial pages carried succulent excerpts from the chapter on the anti-trust laws. Would the author of *The Folklore of Capitalism*, they asked, have his heart in the job? But the campaign died down. Arnold was obviously so well qualified for the

6. Mr. Jackson became Solicitor-General, although by not too wide a margin of confirmation. He writes no books, but—what is almost as dangerous—he makes speeches.

post by gifts and training that blocking his nomination would be fantastic. Their own hearts were not in the job of hounding him.

I am certain that Arnold will make a first-rate man for his post. Yet the irony of the appointment remains — except that it is an irony directed back toward the book. One who reads the account of the Arnold-Borah encounter in the committee room cannot but feel that the temper of Arnold's replies to Borah was not quite the temper of the book. There was more restraint in it, less joyousness, less certitude, less of the sharp quality of the dissecting room. The moral, of course, is that you don't take your dissecting instruments into the Senate chamber — it would clutter up the place and get in the way of the Senators. Yet it is a moral worth remembering. Here was the historian who was given a chance not only to write history but to make it: and he failed to carry over his historian's techniques. Here was the philosopher become king, acting every inch the king but somewhat less the philosopher.

This raises the entire question of Arnold's "principles of political dynamics." The tactic that Arnold builds up in his concluding chapters is a tactic of accommodation and compromise; Arnold has been compared with many great writers of the past, but in this respect the best comparison is with John Morley's *On Compromise*. The heart of the book seems to me to lie in the new tactic of capitalist progressivism that it proposes.

There can be no doubt that a new movement of what we may call middle-class radicalism is arising in America. To my mind, Arnold — more than any man who has appeared on the landscape so far — is its philosopher: he rationalizes both its thought and its tactic. The possible exception is President Roosevelt, who is a good tactician but no philosopher, and who is better counted as a datum for Arnold to rationalize. There is a deep nativist streak in Arnold's thinking, which shows itself in an isolationism both as to foreign policy and foreign thought. There is something of the spaciousness and exuberance of the American plains in him, as also in a politician who comes very close to Arnold's ideal — Congressman Maury Maverick of Texas. Arnold writes of the "rise of a class of engineers, salesmen, minor executives, social workers" as the significant emergence of the immediate future. His chapter on "The Social Philosophy of Tomorrow" is a vague but provocative forecast of the coming of something that is neither communism nor capitalism, but something else in its own way just as thorough going — that *tertium quid*, an American radicalism. Its tactic is to be gloriously opportunistic, something very close to a shrewd and intuitive demagogism.

This is, of course, not Arnold's own program: he is again describing what he sees ahead, not advocating anything. Yet we have learned from Veblen's example that description, if persistent and exclusive, may be held *faute de mieux* to take the place of advocacy. Perhaps that is doing

Arnold an injustice. But there can be little doubt that all this jibes pretty well with the principles of political dynamics that he confesses to. It has given rise, among certain critics,⁷ to the warning that there are elements in Arnold's thinking that run parallel to elements to be found in fascism. I think that's going it strong. But Arnold's anti-rationalism, his anti-intellectualism, his radical pragmatism, his cult of the survivor, his deification of the practical man and the organizing genius, his emphasis on the discovery of effective techniques, his opportunism, his leaning toward middle-class radicalism, his mob-psychology conception of the masses—all these, if torn out of the context of Arnold's own pattern, could be fitted into a pattern that would begin to look sinister. I say this not because I feel that anyone as sophisticated about politics as Arnold is needs any admonition. I say it because it is always worth while for us to remind ourselves that as political thinkers, no less than as political administrators appearing before Senate Committees or as editors or as teachers, we owe a responsibility to our ideas. And that responsibility is to think of them in the context of our time, and in the light of the tendencies rampant in our world. Direction and consequence are as much part of ideas as origin and innate quality.

Yet my guess is that the real criticism of Arnold is not in the fact that his ideas tend to form any sort of pattern, but that there is too little pattern in them. In his almost obsessive desire to steer clear of ideal values and moral judgments, he has had to concentrate on tactics and techniques exclusively. His last chapter tells you how to get things done in politics: what you may want to get done is your own affair. Now, I have no stomach to reprove a man for not doing what he does not set out to do. Arnold has not chosen to write a program, or a theory of moral or political values. Yet that is in itself a deeply significant thing. He gives us a tactic—but for what? Means have no import without ends: yet when you get to the question of ends, Arnold is maddeningly elusive. It is deeply significant that we find in him no real economic philosophy or program, other than a vague allegiance to the amorphous experimentalism of the New Deal; no political tactic that goes beyond techniques to programs or values; no philosophy of industrial change that goes beyond a grasp of the importance of technology and its compulsive character.

VII. BEYOND MYTHS

Do what you will with Thurman Arnold, you cannot ignore him. He has placed himself squarely in the path of our attention, as few social thinkers have done in this decade; and his book is one of the best warrants of the vitality of our thought. There is in him a daring and

7. Cf. James Burnham, Book Review, 4 *PARTISAN REVIEW*, (March, 1938) 50-53.

irresponsibility that go with singular creativeness. He takes intellectual risks that the more cautious and cloistered of us would consider dizzying. He is volatile, shifting, contradictory—but he is alive, and so is his book. Its confusion is a mirror and index of the confusion of our social system and our whole intellectual world; but its acid is the expression of a corrosive force in our culture which may yet dissolve those confusions and make new social constructions possible.

And yet I cannot suppress the feeling, for all of Arnold's realism, for all his shrewd insights into men's motives and foibles, for all his tough-minded grasp of the dynamics of political life, that the plane on which he does his thinking is the shadow-world of two-dimensional symbols, which do not reach to the substance of social reality. "Men believe that society is disintegrating," he says in one place, "when it can no longer be pictured in familiar terms." True enough, and a good truth on the symbolic plane. But let us go beyond symbols, beyond myths, beyond what men believe, to society itself as an objective fact. When *is* society disintegrating? But to answer this, Arnold would have to have not a philosophy of symbols, but a theory of society and of history. Perhaps one answer is that society is disintegrating when its thinkers no longer ask when it is, but only when men believe it to be.

But that is only a surmise, not a theory. The fate of societies, we may be certain, will be decided not by symbols but by the strength of what they stand for.