

## Eric Voegelin and Enlightenment Rationalism

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Explaining Eric Voegelin's (1901-1985) analysis of Enlightenment rationalism presents difficulties for the author of a brief essay. Voegelin's political theory is philosophically dense; it includes multiple changes in focus and emphasis; and it encompasses thirty-four volumes. The Enlightenment is a large and complex topic, and like most epochal/school of thought designations its philosophical and historical boundaries are somewhat indistinct, variegated, and subject to disagreement. In Henry F. May's *The Enlightenment in America*, he organizes the Enlightenment into four categories that converge in some ways and diverge in others.<sup>1</sup> Voegelin's critique of the Enlightenment focuses on what May classifies as the "Revolutionary Enlightenment" and what others have called the "Radical Enlightenment." Unlike May, Voegelin was not interested in giving a rounded and balanced analysis of the Enlightenment because his focus was not the Enlightenment itself but a broader intellectual genealogy of which the Enlightenment was a part. He was concerned primarily with the rise of political religions, secular/pseudo-spiritual ideologies and political movements that were the outgrowth of existential closure to the truth of existence. Like the sophist Protagoras, such ideologies and political movements substituted man for God as the source of existential, political, and social order and the measure of morality, meaning, and reality. The Enlightenment fit into a pedigree of modern political thought that he classified as "apostatic revolt" (FETR 3). In short, the Enlightenment and its breed of rationalism were interesting to Voegelin insofar as they contributed to the development of immanentizing ideologies and were, thus, part of the Western crisis of order that inspired his work.

The task at hand, then, warrants definition of Enlightenment rationalism while acknowledging that some degree of simplification is necessary for the sake of clarity and succinctness. The Enlightenment was an intellectual, political, and cultural movement that Peter

Gay describes as “a family of philosophies, ...a cultural climate” that was characterized by rebellion against traditional ideas and organized Christianity in particular.<sup>2</sup> It tended to embrace the rationalism of modern science to the exclusion of revelation, myth, tradition, and the synthesis of faith and reason. It inspired the belief that the progress of the natural sciences would result in moral progress and the dramatic improvement of social, political, and economic life. The Enlightenment was a reaction to the perceived darkness of the Medieval era, the suppression of reason; it celebrated the exploration of ideas that questioned the authority of existing political, social, and religious elites. Alexander Pope wrote an Epitaph on Sir Isaac Newton that conveys the common view of the transition from Medieval darkness to enlightenment:

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:

God said, Let Newton be! and all was light.

Enlightenment thought has been described as the religion of reason and the religion of humanity, language that conveys Voegelin's characterization of the Enlightenment as apostatic revolt. The new religion replaces the old religion. Thomas Jefferson was true to Enlightenment principles when he revised the Bible with a knife removing descriptions of metaphysical experiences (e.g., miracles) unverifiable by scientific or natural reason. Thomas Paine referred to the Enlightenment as the Age of Reason, the title of his 1794 book. Both Jefferson and Paine saw the French Revolution as the application of Enlightenment ideas to political and social life. The revolution was part of a global democratic movement inspired by the liberation of reason from the constraints imposed by the church, monarchs, and aristocratic privilege. While secular in some respects, Enlightenment thinkers like Auguste Comte (1798-1857) were deeply spiritual in a way that contrasted with traditional religion. They radically immanentized (brought into history) the Christian eschaton (the trans-historical fulfillment of human existence in an

afterlife). Voegelin was especially interested in apocalyptic expectation and its relation to politics. While he recognized that aspects of the Enlightenment had secular characteristics, he identified its religious and spiritual tendencies, including Comte's Religion of Humanity, as its most significant feature because of its effect on the Western crisis of order. In fact, Voegelin attributed the secularism of Enlightenment rationalism, including positivism, to religious desires.

The Enlightenment developed, formed, and declined over the course of centuries; its paradigmatic age was the eighteenth century and its most fertile ground was France. Scholars continue to write about it because it has influenced political, economic, social, and religious life long after its cultural peak. It has been the source of heated and ideologically-driven debates about enduring questions including: What is human nature? and What is the best political regime? Locke, Jefferson, and Paine answer the latter question based on their answer to the former question. Human beings are rational by nature and, therefore, forms of government, like monarchy, that reject popular consent are illegitimate. They opposed the divine right of kings and in its place, they posited the self-evident, rational natural right of the people to rule themselves. In their view, consent of the governed is the only reasonable basis for government's legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> The Enlightenment's contributors include Francis Bacon, Locke, David Hume, Adam Smith, Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, Ben Franklin, Condorcet, Denis Diderot, Comte, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Claude-Henri Saint Simon, and Montesquieu among others. It influenced or was influenced by the Renaissance, the Reformation and Protestantism, the French Revolution, the American Revolution, the Freemasons, Unitarianism, Utilitarianism, Deism, positivism, democracy, capitalism, and Marxism.

The focus of this volume is on one aspect of the Enlightenment, its conception of human rationality. My essay explains Voegelin's critique of Enlightenment rationalism that is part of his

larger analysis of modernity and the Western crisis that culminates in the totalitarian revolutions of the twentieth century. He considers totalitarian movements like Nazism and communism as well as socialism, positivism, and humanitarianism to be the “ideological offspring of the Enlightenment” (vol. 5: 13). Voegelin’s primary work on the topic is *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, republished in his collected works as *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man*.<sup>4</sup> After its initial publication in 1975, the eighteenth-century thinkers and movements that comprised the Enlightenment and figured prominently in the book faded into the background of his work. Much of Voegelin’s political theory is an effort to trace the development of political and social thought to its spiritual origins as a way of understanding the modern crisis of order. His philosophical diagnosis of the Western crisis is the foundation for his prescriptive response: restoration of pre-modern symbols and experiences of order to memory so that they can become a living force with which to oppose the disorder of the present age.

Voegelin has much to say about the Enlightenment. The analysis here will focus on his core contention that Enlightenment rationalism substitutes a false spirituality for authentic religiosity that stems from a loss of the balance of consciousness between mundane and transcendent existence, between mortality and immortality. The balance is achieved by Aristotle’s *bios theoretikos*, the contemplative life, and lost by Enlightenment thinkers like Jean Le Rond d’Alembert (1717-1783) who replaces it with the process of acquiring scientifically-derived useful knowledge. Three corollary points will be incorporated into the analysis: 1) Enlightenment rationalism elevates method above substance; 2) Enlightenment rationalism is irrational because it is reductionistic (it is unwilling “to recognize the *ratio* of ontology and philosophical anthropology” CW, vol. 5: 106); and 3) Enlightenment rationalism embraces a

progressive historicism that claims to know the meaning *of* history thus ending the search for meaning *in* history.

### **Pseudo-spirituality**

From his earliest publications, Voegelin insisted that philosophers must account for the full range of human experience including participation in divine reality. In his view, reality was not limited to what was experienced through sense perception or determined by a particular method of investigation. It encompassed a vast horizon of historical experience that was beyond the comprehension of any one individual. He used “Second Reality,” a concept borrowed from Robert Musil, to refer to ideological abstractions and “ismic constructions” that claimed a part of reality to be its whole. He insisted that the *metaxic* (in-between) structure of reality was unchanging and that human reason was limited in its understanding of reality. He was sensitive to and critical of efforts that truncated, inverted, or eliminated the open search for the truth of existence.

Because modern ideologies are the consequence of varying degrees of existential and intellectual closure to divine reality, they are apt to identify the source of order in man’s revolt from God. In his early scholarship on political religions, Voegelin stated that the Western crisis was a consequence of “the secularization of the soul” (CW, vol. 5: 24). The crisis included efforts to either ignore man’s spiritual nature, as was the case with Max Weber’s value-free positivism,<sup>5</sup> or substitute a radical immanence for transcendence as evidenced in the works of thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and Karl Marx. Such thinkers lost the tension and balance between immanence and transcendence which exist not as unconnected spheres of existence but as integrated (*metaxic*) aspects of human experience. The loss of the tension between immanence

and transcendence indicates a loss of the balance of consciousness<sup>6</sup> as individuals imagine a new pseudo-reality (Second Reality) that is void of human-divine participation.

A universe governed by natural laws can be controlled by humans once they unleash the potential of scientific knowledge. Control of natural law gives humans a creative power with which to remake the world. Human nature itself can be transformed and with it the conventions and institutions that are obstacles to progress and perfection. The growing confidence of human beings, inspired in part by the accomplishments of modern science, leads to the construction of ideological movements that aim to radically transform man and society. Before the new visions of human nature and politics can be imagined, the philosophical anthropology of ancient and Judeo-Christian thinking has to be rejected or radically reinterpreted. Voegelin starkly separates the older Western tradition of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas from the Enlightenment thinkers who develop irreconcilable theories of human nature and politics. *The New Science of Politics* is an effort to restore political science to its older foundations by exposing the reductionism of positivism and modern political ideologies.

The ideas of Helvetius, D'Alembert, Turgot, Comte, and Condorcet, among others, prepare the way for the great, utopian ideological movements of modernity. The French Revolution is formative in the development of these ideological movements because for the first time "the apocalypse of man is driving...toward the deification of intramundane society." The consequence is "the destruction of Western Christian civilization" and "the tentative creation of a non-Christian society" (FETR, 176). Voegelin calls this desire to replace Christian civilization "the consciousness of epoc" (3), a deliberate effort to circumvent the existing cultural order.<sup>7</sup>

Hobbes is an important figure in the Western crisis because he responded to the rising conflict between religious sects by attempting to depoliticize religion and solve a spiritual

problem with institutional structure, absolute rule. The *summum bonum* of the ancients and Christians is replaced by Hobbes with the *summum malum*, the fear of violent death. The absolute ruler, the Leviathan, is a mortal god who, like Machiavelli's prince, can manipulate power in accordance with natural law and the needs of order without attunement to a transcendent truth. Yet, as Voegelin notes, "Hobbes countered the gnostic immanentization of the eschaton which endangered existence by a radical immanence of existence which denied the eschaton" (CW, vol. 5: 234). Removing consciousness of the eschaton and its transcendent structures from the life of human beings and human civilization eliminates the very source of order on which the ends of politics depend. Once the transcendent source of order and community is removed, Hobbes is left with the problem of forming a society out of individuals who are united by nothing more than a common passion to avoid violent death. The internal logic of Hobbes's social contract theory is only rational if his assumptions about the *summum bonum* and natural law are accurate. Yet, Voegelin considers Hobbes's assumptions, and social contract theory generally, to be irrational because they are based on ahistorical abstractions, the consequence of unnecessarily confining theoretical boundaries to utilitarian knowledge.

Here lies the crux of Voegelin's critique of Enlightenment rationalism. He contends that a just political and social order, including rational discussion on which it depends, are only possible if human beings are open to transcendent reality in whatever form it takes.

Enlightenment rationalists operate from contrasting assumptions. They either, like Hobbes and Weber, assert that competing notions of transcendent reality are the cause of disorder and must, then, be depoliticized or they, like Comte, recognize the necessity of existential attunement to a spiritual ground but they immanentize the ground and divinize man and/or the state. In either case, the balance of consciousness has been lost; the *metaxic* structure of reality has been



deformed in the consciousness of the rationalist and ideological revolutionary. In short, humans are capable of self-salvation; they have no need for transcendent intervention. Nature has equipped them with reason with which they can create new sources of order, e.g., natural rights, the great leader, the *masse totale*, the general will. To be rational, however, political theory must account for human participation in divine reality.

Hobbesian political theory becomes possible once modern science, and Christianity before it, de-divinizes the cosmos. What is left is a radical separation of transcendent reality and immanent-world reality. The consequences of this de-divinization of the cosmos includes the movement toward a secular politics and a narrowing of the horizons of consciousness. De-divinization is followed by the re-divinization of politics. In the latter case, Second Realities are created that substitute man for the transcendent ground of being. Comte unites these two parts of modernity in his religion of humanity. He is a positivist who claims to be the messiah; he is what Voegelin calls an “intramundane eschatologist” (FETR 145). Once the world-transcendent God is replaced by the great leader, the state assumes the position as the ground of being. Moral resistance to the state is impossible because it has become the highest authority, the embodiment of Turgot’s *masse totale* and Condorcet’s superman. The new religion of humanity rejects “the creation of man by God” as superstition. It “now returns as the creation of the superman through Condorcet” (FETR 134). As the state is led by and gives birth to the superman, it increasingly represents the *masse totale*; history progresses toward its perfection; the progressive philosophy of history is born.

### **Progressive Historicism**

Voegelin was a philosopher of history as well as a political theorist. He insisted that while meaning can be found in history, human knowledge of history was limited. In particular, the end

of history was a mystery. Enlightenment rationalism inflates the capacity of human understanding to include gnostic claims about the progressive unfolding and end of history. Such “stop history” ideologies are the consequence of losing the balance of consciousness. Human beings participate in a reality that includes divine-human encounter. As noted, Voegelin used the term *metaxy* to denote the in-between of human existence, e.g., immortal-mortal, divine-human, transcendent-immanent. Voegelin states that “the problem of human history is precisely the tension between the historical existence of man and his transcendental destination” (FETR 158). The *metaxic* structure of reality is permanent. Human nature is part of this historical structure and, thus, is unchanging. Ideologies that claim the ability to transform human nature have lost consciousness of the *metaxic* structure of reality. They claim the ability to transgress the limits of historical life by using political power to bring history to its culmination. In the unfolding of history, traditional obstacles to progress are eliminated, and in their most radical forms the ideologies purport the perfection of both man and society.

### **The Irrationality of the Enlightenment and the Problem of Method**

One of the primary characteristics of the Enlightenment is its rejection of irrational sources of knowledge such as tradition, revelation, religious dogma, and metaphysics. Voegelin considers this proposition to be reductionistic and irrational itself because it contracts the field of scientific inquiry and eliminates from philosophical inquiry centuries of work by philosophers who provided insights into human nature. For the purposes of philosophical analysis, he was opposed to the reification of truth into dogmas and doctrines because it separated the engendering experiences of order from the symbols used to articulate them. He used the term “logophobia” to refer to the unwillingness and fear of philosophy, the open search for truth. In Voegelin’s more expansive view, science

is a search for truth concerning the nature of the various realms of being. Relevant in science is whatever contributes to the success of this search. Facts are relevant in so far as their knowledge contributes to the study of essence, while methods are adequate in so far as they can be effectively used as a means for this end. (CW, vol. 5: 91)

Why do many Enlightenment figures wish to narrow the horizons of science? Voegelin claims that religious motives are ultimately the cause. What is the religious motive? Radical thinkers like Turgot and Comte exhibit at least some gnostic tendencies. They are not only dissatisfied with the world as it is, but they suffer from what Voegelin terms *pneumopathology*, a sickness of the soul that causes a desire to escape from the world as it is. In the de-divinized world, the anxiety of existence is heightened making it more difficult for humans to cope with the tension of existence. The temptation is great to short-circuit the process that ends in death and immortality. The instruments of escape from heightened anxiety are gnostic myths about the perfection of human beings, human society, and the end of history. From the Enlightenment forward, there is a proliferation of gnostic ideologies that purport to contain the secret knowledge that when operationalized will transform human existence. Such gnostic ideologies are political religions based on the pretense of science (e.g., National Socialism, Communism, positivism). They theologize about the meaning of human existence and the ultimate destiny of man. They are irrational because they close off philosophical inquiry when it encounters evidence of *metaxic* reality and the limits of human progress. In other words, appeals to the historical reality of the limits of human nature and politics are rejected as unscientific and irrational. Gnostics lack the spiritual strength to come to grips with life in the *metaxy* including its many injustices that limit the possibilities of politics and human life generally. Man's ultimate destiny, the older tradition proclaims, is not in the historical world of politics but a transcendent beyond. Man

must, then, balance the demands of mundane, immanent existence with his transcendent destiny.<sup>8</sup> Unable to accept this reality, gnostics are intent on immanentizing the Christian eschaton by bringing heaven to earth.

Given the reality of the *metaxy*, the transformation of human nature and society is impossible. Attempts to accomplish the utopian end of history characterizes the horrors of the twentieth century totalitarian movements. Voegelin provides the theoretical genealogy of revolutionary and totalitarian movements. The Enlightenment plays a prominent role in the genealogy because it helps to develop two essential characteristics of modern revolutionary movements, pseudo-spirituality and progressive historicism.

### **Helvétius, D'Alembert, Turgot, Condorcet, and Comte**

Voegelin's conclusions about the Enlightenment, and modernity generally, stem from his analysis of thinkers who contributed to the theoretical ground on which modern ideologies and revolutions have been constructed. Helvétius (1715-1771) is a key figure for Voegelin because in his rejection of Christianity he inverts the direction in which human beings find the source of reality and order. Christianity directed man's philosophical and religious gaze to the heavens toward the realm of his ultimate destiny. Helvétius, like Hobbes, explained the "internal structure of man" using utilitarian criterion, sensory perception and a pleasure-pain calculus (FETR 69). This inversion is combined with the notion that human passion is not the source of disorder, as Plato and Aristotle argued, but the "fundamental force on which all order in the conduct of man has to rely" (FETR 69). Voegelin calls this new view of human passion "the instrumentalization of man" (69). In the older tradition the spiritual center of man, that which orders his life in accordance with a divine will, was the soul; reason, or nous, was the sensorium of transcendence. The new man's reason is limited to calculating self-interest and the pleasure-pain calculus. The

new man is an instrument to be manipulated by the legislator, in the case of Hobbes by the Leviathan. Man is no longer an end in himself but an instrumental part of the collective whole of humanity. The meaning of his existence is now tied to his participation in Turgot's *masse totale*. The change in meaning marks "the externalization of processes of the soul" and the "perversion" of the life of the soul (FETR 71). As Voegelin explains, the "growth of the soul through an internal process which is nourished through communication with transcendent reality is replaced by the formation of conduct through external management" (70). As Walter Lippman notes, among the consequences of this inversion is a politics based on passion and interest in which mass communication is used to manipulate public opinion.<sup>9</sup> What is lost is the primacy of character and virtue as necessary prerequisites for the right conduct of statesmen. Political leaders take on new importance because they embody and represent the externalized life of the soul.

Helvétius contributed to the idea of social evolution measured by the conformity of private interest to the public interest. The evolution of society makes little sense unless its end is identified, and it eventually stops moving toward that end. Helvétius understands this problem and is one of the first modern thinkers to "take his leap into eschatology" and suggest the end of history. Once the objective of history and human existence has been identified, all that remains is its realization. Comte, a positivist, provides a more developed philosophy of history that is based on his formation of a political religion, the religion of humanity. Comte's positivism builds on Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, a collection of knowledge that was useful to the progress of human society. D'Alembert wanted to reorient the universe to the scientific methods of mathematics and the natural sciences. He considered himself to be part of the "revolutionary expansion of the horizon of knowledge" (FETR 76). Useful knowledge excludes the life of contemplation lauded

by Aristotle, the *bios theoretikos*, and the ancient focus of philosophy to search for knowledge about human nature. Voegelin considers these Enlightenment attitudes to be contrary to the humanistic tradition but central to the idea of progress characteristic of Enlightenment theory. Progress is measured by the advancement of scientific knowledge and its application to society not by a deeper understanding of the human condition.

In addition, d'Alembert wished to create a new, autonomous moral code to guide the application of useful knowledge. He was convinced that radical material inequality was contrary to justice, but he did not take the Benthamite step declaring the greatest good for the greatest number to be the foundation of morality. What does begin to take shape is that justice requires a redistribution of wealth and that a planned society is the instrument for its realization. To support the legitimacy of this vision of scientific knowledge and the progress of society toward equality, d'Alembert creates the principle of "the authoritative present," "the assumption that the situation of the moment, or a situation which is envisaged as immediately impending, is superior in value to any prior historical situation of fact" (FETR 83). The principle establishes the superiority of the present over the past, but it does not explain its relationship to the future. Will one authoritative present be replaced by another? The authoritative present remains authoritative into the future because it marks the end of history which Helvétius establishes by a "leap into eschatology" declaring the present to be the final phase of history (FETR 84). The future is an age of progress and the principles that engendered it cannot be surpassed. The idea of the authoritative present bestows "grace on the present" and "is needed for the adequate expression of intramundane religiousness in politics" (FETR 84). Voegelin responds to these claims by stating that "This act of grace, bestowed by the intellectual leaders of Enlightenment on themselves and their age, is the source of the genuine revolutionary pathos that animates the idea

of progress” (FETR 84-85). Man no longer needs a transcendent god to save him. Voegelin identifies Comte and Marx as indicative of the spiritual disease that combines self-divinization and self-salvation. They both substitute “an intramundane *logos* of human consciousness” for “the transcendent *logos*” (FETR 276).

Turgot recognized that the new meaning of history must surpass or at least equal the universal, Christian meaning. The *masse totale* provides historical meaning as mankind moves toward perfection. Individual human beings cease to have historical meaning, but mankind in the lump carries historical meaning. The *masse totale* is “the tentative evocation of a new worldly divinity” (FETR 94). Comte creates the new worldly god and, with other thinkers, he has “mutilated the idea of man” (FETR 95).

Condorcet adds to the authoritative present the notion of predictability in social and political life that assumes similarity between it and natural science. If the laws of both natural and social science are fixed and knowable, then outcomes are predictable as well. Condorcet develops a plan to direct the destiny of mankind that contains three primary objectives, ending the inequality of nations (in regard to wealth and the development of rationalism), ending the inequality of individuals, and the perfection of human beings including the end of death itself. The first objective requires the intervention of enlightened nations in the affairs of less enlightened nations. The second objective is accomplished, in part, by the creation of compulsory social security programs that eliminate great gaps between rich and poor and bring everyone into the middle class. The final objective of the plan requires the transformation human nature, the creation of a superman. Condorcet rejects the Christian dependence on revelation, grace, and God’s mercy for salvation in favor of self-salvation. Voegelin comments that

This program of Condorcet seems to be the first systematic project elaborated by a Western totalitarian for the radical destruction of all civilizations of mankind, the high civilizations as well as the less differentiated native civilizations, and to transform the surface of the globe into the habitat of a standardized mankind which is formed by the ideology of a handful of megalomaniac intellectuals. There is hardly any discernible difference on this point between the totalitarian Progressivist and his Communist and National Socialist successors. (FETR 132)

## **Conclusion**

Voegelin's critique of Enlightenment rationalism focuses on the spiritual and religious aspects of the thinkers who comprise the historical and philosophical movement. Although it has the reputation for being secular, Voegelin identifies the religious characteristics of a variety of Enlightenment thinkers. The development of a new religion is intended to replace the existing Christian humanism and older philosophical anthropology. Because it narrows the scope of philosophical enquiry, Voegelin considers the positivism of the Enlightenment to be irrational. He is especially attentive to the tendency in Enlightenment thought to immanentize the Christian eschaton and substitute an intramundane *logos* for a transcendent *logos*. The consequences of Enlightenment rationalism are revolutionary and manifest in the radical and totalitarian movements that are part of the Western crisis of order. Restoration of order begins with realization that Enlightenment philosophy is far more radical than is typically thought and that it represents a paradigm shift in political thinking that aims to obliterate the classical and Judeo-Christian tradition on which the Western order depends.



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>2</sup>Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), x-xi.

<sup>3</sup>Paine went so far as to suggest the infallibility of the people.

<sup>4</sup>*From Enlightenment to Revolution*, ed. by John H. Hallowell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1975) and *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man*, ed. with an introduction by David Walsh in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 26 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>Voegelin classified Weber's positivism/value-free science as "modern irrationalism" (CW, vol. 5: 105).

<sup>6</sup>Enlightenment thinkers are not the only ones that Voegelin identifies for losing the balance of consciousness. St. Paul loses it as well. See *The Ecumenic Age*, chapter 5 "The Pauline Vision of the Resurrected."

<sup>7</sup>Consciousness of epoc is not limited to Enlightenment thinkers. Voegelin identifies the twelfth-century thinker Joachim of Fiore as the first of many.

<sup>8</sup>The loss of balance between immanent and transcendent concerns is present throughout human history. The profit Issah. . .

<sup>9</sup>See Lippmann's *The Phantom Public*, *Public Opinion*, and *The Good Society*.