COMMENTARY

IN DEFENSE OF OLD HYPOCRISY

We don't hear about the Seven Deadly Sins anymore—Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Envy, and Sloth. That's because these medieval gentlemen have adopted aliases and new life-styles and "gone legit" in today's world.

Pride's new name is Success. He still pushes, shoves, and steps on people, but his new name and expensive acquisitions make him generally admired. Covetousness's new name is Lawsuit. These days, when we want something belonging to another person or another group, we don't quietly covet or suddenly snatch, as of yore; we call in Lawsuit. Not only do we get what we want, but it's all legal and proper. Lust's new name is Expression. He's turned his whole bag inside out: while it's wrong to lust, it is positively healthy to express one's desires. Anger's new name is Indignation. And he's having a grand time being indignant—not angry, mind you—over a host of things: people with more than three children; the anti-pollution cars that get five miles to the gallon; builders who cut down trees to build houses for other people; physicians' incomes; Presidential pardons.

Gluttony's new name is Good Life. His racket used to be limited pretty much to food and drink, but these days he's into tobacco, drugs, luxury items, and vacuous entertainment of all kinds. Envy, always the creep in the crowd, has a new name, too. It's Regulation. And there are grounds for believing that Regulation is more successful in the rackets than any of his cronies. Admit it! Who doesn't all for Regulation nowadays wherher he sees other persons or other groups becoming successful? Sloth's new name is Freedom. Sloth may be lazy, but he's not stupid. There is just no end of things he doesn't have to do in the name of Freedom that he would have to do if it were suspected that he is just plain lazy.

While the old familiar has been going legit, a big, new baddy has blown into town. His name is Hypocrisy, and he doesn't use an alias. Because of him we know it's perfectly okay to buy all the merchandise the modern medivalists are pushing, just so long as we aren't hypocritical about it. Do I drink a lot? Sure I drink a lot! Do I smoke pot? Sure I smoke pot! Do I commit adultery? Sure I commit adultery! Do I lie and cheat? Sure I lie and cheat (doesn't everybody?). Do I abuse and take advantage of my fellow man? Sure I abuse and take advantage of my fellow man. But—whatever I do, or am, there's one thing I am not. I am not a hypocrite!

Well, now, all you folks who take comfort in the fact that you aren't hypocrites, I've got news for you. You are the big losers in the old "bait and switch" game. And guess who the other players are? Right! Success, Lawsuit, Expression, Indignation, Good Life, Regulation, and Freedom. As a bad actor, Hypocrisy is strictly small time, but he makes a perfect fall guy. You see, our old friends brought him in from out of town, set him up as the deadly sin, and are now busily switching us into their new enterprises. Being young and inexperienced (although dreadfully loath to admit it) our children are taken in more than we are, but none of us escapes entirely.

Me, I'll take Old Hypocrisy. He

Carl G. Crozier is a realtor in Bethesda, Maryland.

Harper's welcomes brief contributions from all of its readers who find themselves inspired to passionate statement. Please send entries, including stamped, self-addressed envelope, to "Commentary."

played the game straight. If he seduced the pastor's wife, he still went to church and shook the pastor's hand on the way out. If he drank himself stupid at home, he sipped decorously in public. If he cheated on his income tax or took unfair advantage of colleagues, clients, or customers, he was all the while proclaiming the moral greatness of America and the ideals of fair play. I don't know about you, but I infinitely prefer Old Hypocrisy to New Hypocrisy. This new chap has no scruples at all. He has bailed us into the ultimate hypocrisy of believing that almost anything goes as long as we let it all hang out. Why, he has even invaded the home. Now, if our son is going to do some heavy drinking, we want him to do his drinking at home. If our daughter insists on having an affair, it's best that her boyfriend move in so that they can have their affair here at home. If our kids are smoking pot, as good responsible parents we want them to smoke their pot at home. Home, sweet home!

This essay (and "essay" does mean "try") can serve as a rallying cry for all us stabilized, old-fashioned hypocrites to unite in driving out this virulent new form of hypocrisy which recognizes no, or almost no, standards of personal morality short of murder (and even there abortion and euthanasia are busy bees). In particular, this is a rallying cry for beleaguered parents throughout our great land. Peace be unto you! You now can say, "Yes, dear offspring, I am a hypocrite, a good old-fashioned hypocrite. And what's more, I am proud of it!"

So you see, Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Envy, and Sloth, I know you by your real names and you aren't going to bait and switch me. If my child or my friend or I cannot always uphold civiliza-
"my Is one of the very few writers in this country to work with some skill in the field of literary documentary. Observations from the Treadmill contains an extraordinary amount of life in its pages."
—Norman Mailer

“You can read two yards of the Great Books without encountering between two covers as much wisdom, knavery, truth, deception, beauty, and suppurating wretchedness.”
—National Observer

“Makes maturity seem a desirable condition.” —Crawdaddy

“Perhaps the most important such journal functioning today.” —Newsday

Observations from the Treadmill™


OFT, RFD #1, UNION, ME. 04862
I enclose $1. Please send me a sample copy of Treadmill.

Name______________________________
Address______________________________
City______________________ State____ Zip________

COMMENTS

tion’s hard-won standards, we can at least recognize them. This Old Hypocrite is going to play the game straight!

Urbi et orbi. To the city and the world!
—Carl G. Croyder
Potomac, Md.

All of the “enlightenment” of the Seventies falls flatly on the Thirties and Forties (and other decades) without any standard of contemporary relevance. Should Hollywood be hissed for casting blacks in servant roles when at the time it was criticized for casting them at all? Would we like the Seventies to be judged by the future pieties of the Nineties?

The changed values are not disturbing—indeed, most of them are welcome—but the historical distortion that accompanies them is as vicious as the old Soviet reworking of the past. The distortion is not in a denim-clad audience’s innocent incomprehension of a top-hatted Fred Astaire, or the mystified response to old courtship traditions and formal manners, or the confusion about gaiety in depression-era films (“Why are those people laughing? Don’t they know there’s a depression going on?” queries one student “historian”). Rather, the hissing tells us we cannot accept the patriotism of World War II or the conservatism of the Fifties or the role of blacks in Thirties musicals. It is more than a comment; it’s a denial of history.

The rest of the world is often shocked at our ignorance of their histories. Are we now becoming as ignorant of our own? The method of teaching history Presidential term by Presidential term was often a pathetic exercise in boredom or self-congratulation, but at least between the hills and valleys of war and peace, depression and prosperity, one got a glimpse, however small, of the steady flow of the American past from its beginning. The current Balkanization of American History into isolated episodes of violence or bits and pieces of ethnic experience is like a tide that always ebbs. History then easily devolves into history.

It is equally simplistic for the reactionaries to say that those without a knowledge of history are condemned to repeat it. Historians rarely find repetition, although, like psychiatrists, they recognize similar symptoms. No, the hissing in Berkeley and elsewhere is a basic misunderstanding of the past and of us present, an intolerance if you will; and as such it is one of the more depressing new sounds of the Seventies.

—DENNIS HALAC
Berkeley, Calif.

HISTORY IN THE SEVENTIES

A new sound can be heard in Berkeley that will probably spread across the country, if it has not done so already. The direct descendant of the Bronx cheer, the hoot, and the raspberry, the hiss rises out of the audiences at lectures, films, and social gatherings. In the nonverbal, non-demonstrative Seventies, this hiss may be the leitmotiv of the decade.

Beyond the crudity of the sound and the simplicity to which it reduces polemic and philosophy, it marks the mood of a generation to whom current events, nostalgia, and history intertwine and confuse. The hiss is most commonly heard at the movies, especially during old films from the Thirties and Forties which have such a paradoxical popularity.

Nostalgia lures this Berkeley generation to the cinema, but then history rears its ugly head. John Garfield intones a patriotic speech in Air Force (made in 1943): a hiss rises up like escaping gas. Lauren Bacall’s independence is cheered in To Have and Have Not (1944), but then she decides to hitch up with Bogie. Sss, sss. James Cagney gives up his gangster life and acknowledges law and order to be the true way. Sss. Joel McCrea in Foreign Correspondent (1939) calls on Americans to get involved in European affairs. Hisses (with a few cheers from aging antifascists).

The hissing and the cheers that often drown out the story are an interesting reflection on the audience’s sense of history. America’s aggression in Vietnam has stained every other American action, past and present. The old myth was that we had won every war. The new myth is that we lost them all, at least morally.

Dennis Halac, a former history teacher, is working on a novel that likens the sixteenth century to our own.