

EDITORIAL

“THE TROUBLE” WITH THE STANDARD OF MODERN JOURNALISM.

By DANIEL DE LEON

“THE trouble,” with modern journalism, which he castigates none too harshly, “is,” says Frank A. Munsey, in an address recently delivered at Yale University, “with the standard, not with the men themselves.” Which is another way of saying that a man died for want of breath. What caused the want of breath? That’s the only question worth asking and looking into. Only the answer to that can really enlighten. That the standard of modern journalism is worthless none will deny; and Mr. Munsey, a gentleman of culture and talent, clearly perceives. But what’s “the trouble” with the standard? in what lies its defect? What purports to be answers to this question occurs a column or so later. We are told that “the hasty, sloppy, insincere work of the present” must be swung away from. Of course, the prevailing journalistic work is insincere. But why? Do people love to be insincere? Mr. Munsey draws almost into “burning” proximity to the answer when he proceeds to say: “the reporters” (he certainly means the whole editorial staff) must be trained so as to be able “to see a thing as it is, and then tell it so that it will both read true and shade true.” Ah, that’s the rub! and having sighted it, Mr. Munsey slides away from the goal, like a center-board boat under full sail, with center-board up.

“To be able to see a thing as it is,” lo, the difference between fitness and unfitness, between knowledge and ignorance,—nor can the knowledge and fitness be acquired by sentiment! Can a Choctaw Indian see the cascade of Niagara “as it is”? Can a Fiji Islander see the mechanism of a chronometer “as it is”? Could either of them “tell what he saw so that it will both read and shade true”? No! For that it requires the trained knowledge of a Sir Robert Lyle and an Edison. Man can see no more than he brings eyes to see with. Now then, in sight of the modern social happenings—the domain of

journalism—the regulation journalist is no better equipped than the Choctaw Indian and Fiji Islander, above referred to. Nay, he is unfitter. With them, at least, the tablets of the mind are clean. With the regulation modern journalist the tablets of the mind are scribbled all over with pot-hooks. In sight of the social phenomena of all degrees, the happenings of the day, that, like planets, constellations, nebulae and comets, are society, the regulation journalist stands like a pupil of the Ptolomaic system of astronomy in sight of the spheres. Things don't fit. Of course, he becomes “hasty”; of course he becomes “sloppy”; of course he becomes “insincere.” Unable to understand the things he sees, he is unable to see them as they are. Net results, he can not tell the story and comment on it “so that it will both read true and shade true.” The regulation modern reporter (journalist) is a perambulating lump of trained unfitness.

The Manchester School of political economy, the Capitalist School of social science never were to society other than like Ptolomaic Schools of astronomy. Not until man fitted astronomic theories to astronomic facts, was the astronomic reporter able “to see” things as they are, and record them truthfully. The modern reporter (journalist), able “to see a thing as it is, and then tell it so that it will both read true and shade true,” must first have his mind swept clean of the cobwebs of the Manchester and Capitalist social theories.

The Yales of to-day do not render that service. That's “the trouble” with the standard of modern journalism. That mind-house-cleaning service is rendered to-day only by the Socialist Labor Party.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded November 2006