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Instant Pudding and Predigested Brains

Now that the elections are over, I can feel free to say that it was during the elections that I was reminded again of the terrifying thought that our Western civilization seems to put such great faith in slogans. Indeed, the one redeeming thing about this is that the Soviets seem to have borrowed this trait, and in the long run, provided we begin doing our own thinking again, this may prove to be the ultimate weapon.

So when Rabbi Gordon called to tell me that it was my turn to talk to the club again, I thought that rather than talk about art, I would ~~talk about~~ discuss another topic. I am sure that everyone here has thought about this and <sup>as</sup> most ~~xxx~~ of you are better qualified to talk about it, I am anticipating a lively discussion period.

My peeve against slogans is not that they are invalid but that they are designed to stimulate action, not thought; this may be acceptable under certain emergency conditions, but otherwise it seems a rather depressing way of life for a people with as much leisure time as we have. For instance, our leisure might make sloganeering a new parlor game...Or equally deplorable, might give us the time to think of the ramifications of the slogan and spur us to action quite contrary to what was in the mind of the creator of the slogan.

For years now, I have been aware that prior to each election, people are exhorted to "get out and vote" or "Go to the Polls" or "Exercise your right to vote" or "It is your duty to vote" or some such. All this advice makes a great deal of sense. But then, these noble exhortations are usually nullified by a prefix or afterthought, "It doesn't matter what party, candidate, etc. you vote for, just so you vote." And for years

more more



instant pudding & predigested brains 2-2-2

this has baffled me because if it doesn't matter for whom I vote, then how can it matter whether or not I exercise my prerogative?

Allied to this is the slogan, "Your vote counts" or "Your vote is important" or some such. One newspaper which reminds us of this regularly before each election had a headline about three weeks before the election to this effect: 17 states wavering and a sub-head, 'election Likely to Be Decided in Them.' This would indicate that the vote was important only in 17 states.

In order to prove that one vote is important, several people have come up with impressive statistics citing occasions when elections were decided by one vote. Does this mean that all the other votes were unimportant? They dox this without consideration of ~~xxx~~ whether or not the election of one particular person over another would have made any difference in filling the office in question. Unless the voter is convinced that this difference exists, his casting of a ballot is one of the hollowest gestures devised by our democracy.

What I object to is not universal suffrage; the franchise is an important and precious thing; voting is a privilege; apathy and indifference to issues facing us are greater threats than any external power. It is our predisposition to sloganeering that I find horrifying; the fact that it ~~extends~~ into this field and so successfully makes me quake with fear for our civilization.

Slogans in themselves are not evil, but they are designed as substitutes for thinking. Because they date back so far in our history, you might say that they anticipate instant puddings, instant cake mixes and all the other tasteless mish-mash on the shelves and in the freezers of our supermarkets. The easy to prepare foods are great for housewives who can't or won't cook; slogans are great for people who can't or won't think. Slog~~x~~ans represent a kind of predigested brain for people who

more more more



instant pudding and predigested brains 3-3-3

won't take the trouble to use and develop their own.

I am not talking about slogans alone. Pre-digested brains take many forms including the jargon and cliches unique in our various professions and trades: the gobbledygook which is supposed to elevate and dignify professions from the rest of wociety but which fails because everyone else is doing it too. My own profession is as guildy as any. Instead of persuading people that works of art are to be looked at and cogitated about, we have supplied a phony vocabulary ostensibly to aid understanding of the works, but which in reality provesxx an end in itself with the result that people in some museums spend hours looking at labels and give only a cursory glance at the exhibitx in question. In short, we are producing label readers.

I don't mean to know the reading of labels because I am an inveterate label reader myself and find it quite rewardang. My wife won't let me shop anymore because I spend so much time divid 1 lb 4 oz into 39¢ to see if a particular can of something is chaper than the 15½ oz can at 2 for 61¢. She can't understand how I can do this and still fail to divide our monthly bills into the monthly check andstill come out with unpaid bills remaining. She also resents the amount of time I spend reading the contents on packages to see whether the percentage of certain toxic ingredients in a given food product exceeds the tolerance that we have built up for it. The Food and Drug Administration has thus done a great service not only to provide means of protecting the consumer but also in providing entertainment.

However, the FDA has been helpless to prevent certain esoteric claims that ~~xxxxxx~~ occasionally appear on labels. But even this material can be quite entertaining. For instance, having acquired a cat, we regularly buy a substance called "Cat Joy". It is the same material

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instant pudding etc. 4-4-4

packaged otherwise under the trade name of "Kitty Litter" and is intended for house-broken cats. Both Cat Joy and Kitty Litter make the same claims (i.e. they both absorb moisture, deoderize, can be used in garbage cans, refrigerator, bread boxes, etc.) Both are priced too high, but equally too high and come in the same size package so that I don't have to do a whole lot of dividing. However, we buy Cat Joy instead of Kitty Litter because we learn from reading the directions that a "Complete Change of Cat Joy is needed only when deemed necessary." Now think about that for awhile, "Complete Change of Cat Joy needed only when deemed necessary." I think that this was written by the same fellow who tells us it doesn't matter for whom we vote as long as we vote.

Revlon has a kind of sneaky one that is the delight of my wife. She ~~doesn't~~ is not a label reader, but she can't escape television commercials and Revlon has a make-up which a stunning model claims will hide even the finest blemishes. The use of the superlatives seems to help because Revlon seems to sell pretty well inspite of scandals and subpoenas and so forth. It doesn't work on my wife because she is chained to the kitchen and can't use make-up and the words are lost on me because I'm so fascinated by the model.

This sort of thing is almost admirable in its subtlety. A few years ago, however, we did have a truly underhanded commercial slogan on which I understand the FDA put the kibosh: That is the Storz beer advertisement which claimed that Storz was "Starch Free as Beer Can Be." implying that other beers were laced with starch and might coagulate in your throat, a claim ~~xxx~~ in the same category as the question, "When did you stop beating your wife?" Even though this advertisement has been withdrawn, people have somehow gotten it into their minds that beer contain large quantities of starch, and every once in awhile I run across someone

more more more



instant pudding etc. 5-5-5

who doesn't drink beer because he avoids starches.

Sometimes competitors will outdo the originator of ~~xxxxxxxx~~ an advertising gimmick. You all remember how Old Golds sold millions of cigarettes on the basis that there was not a cough in a carload, thus starting the whole cigarette industry off on a terrific health binge resulting ultimately in filters for filters. Faced with this great counter attack from its competitors all ~~xxxxx~~ equipped with phony doctors in white jackets, Old Gold finally had to come out and say/that their product supplied "A treat, not a treatment" which was the reverse of its original propaganda. The new line presumes that people don't mind coughs as long as there is a pretty girl with whom to enjoy it.

This brings up the observation that there are great factories producing pre-digested brains, the most active one being that stretch of Madison Avenue extending North and South of 42nd Street in New York. After undergoing a thorough brainwashing process, the factory workers set out not so much to alter or influence our thinking; they set out to do it for us. That we let them is disconcerting, and the fact that it would be considered subversive if we set out to combat this in any organized way is even more woeful.

In part we are vulnerable because of the nature of our language which with the same words convey ~~xxxxxx~~ different meanings. For instance, we might say that an agreeable, mannerly person is not prone to argue. But if I had a dispute with a lovely middle-aged girl (I'm settling for less these days) and were to find her supine on the sofa... And if she were to say to me a ~~/sultry~~ voice, "I am not prone to argue," it might make me panic. This multiple purpose of given words is ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ used to great advantage by the skilled Madison Avenue technicians.

However, this philological bit about words is a subject for a complete paper, and I hope that some day we'll be able to get a scholar in the

more more more



instant pudding etc...6-6-6

group to undertake it. It is only one factor which makes us vulnerable for manipulation. Time is another factor: instead of taking our leisure gracefully, we seem to feel so guilty about the 40 hour week that we become involved in all kinds of organizations which on the one hand tend to standardize us and ~~xxxx~~ on the other hand diminishes our leisure to such an extent that we have to utilize only the packaged things. The pity is that we may know better, but we don't have the time to do better. And this is acceptable to us in part because we have been conditioned by the extent to which we have become spectators, accepting things not of our creation, things in which we don't have any great sense of involvement except vicarious.

The truth of the matter is that we have all become Babbitts to a greater degree than we realize. We make fun of Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt, and ~~ix~~ we don't do precisely the things he did, but ~~Babbitts~~ we space age Babbitts ~~join book clubs, great books discussion groups, xxx~~ and other intellectual and cultural groups. In short, we space age Babbitts are more intellectual and more sophisticated, but we are motivated by the same thing Lewis' Babbitt was because we have become conditioned to a kind of conformity by the people peddling instant pudding and predigested brains.

In the light of this trend, it was extremely gratifying to note the tremendous flop of the Ford Motor Company's Edsel. I have nothing against Ford, but it seems to be a healthy thing that a product which had been so thoroughly ~~xxxxxx~~ consumer researched as much as the Edsel car had been could not establish a market for itself; a healthy thing because here is one small bit of evidence that the consumer is enough of an eccentric to resist being researched; that in spite of his apparent conventionality, he is not always predictable; that it is just possible that we are after all individuals.

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7-7-7

I said at the beginning that I was not going to talk about art, but in closing, I might just add a footnote that after all, perhaps the whole thing has been about art: it has been corrupted by Madison Avenue and this is a negative quotient. But at the same time, art produces individuals either as creators or consumers or ~~mere~~ lovers of art. If you throw out the numbered painting kits and the academy in varied guises including the modern one, art resists packaging, and slogans are an alien thing; instant paint can be manufactured, but there is no such thing as an instant painting.