

The Average American

Alexander Berkman

c. 1935?

The general conception of the “type” American is in Europe picturesque and naive at the same time. In France as in Germany, in the Northern as in the Southern countries, in fact throughout the European Continent, with the exception of England perhaps, the opinion of the man in the street about America and Americans is primitive and inadequate. First of all, the name “an American” immediately suggests riches, wealth. It is almost as if American and rich man are synonyms, at least in the view of the average European who has never been in the United States and who seldom comes in direct contact with Americans in Europe.

In the mind of most people the American is pictured as something very much different from the general run of men. He is very efficient, of course, does things on a large scale, throws away his money and gains it as easily, is generous and yet a good bargainer and sharp in business affairs. On the whole he is a daring individual, even reckless, in short a man from whom unexpected things should always be expected, a person even somewhat irresponsible, especially in his behavior outside of his own country.

Naturally, the American films, which are so popular in Europe, have to a great extent helped to develop and cultivate the exaggerated and picturesque notions of “the American”. The younger European generation immediately visualizes the Western cowboy, with guns in both hands, riding wildly and shooting up the nearest town after the round-up of his cattle. American Prohibition developments, with its rum-running adventures, sinking of ships carrying the forbidden liquor, and particularly the racketeering “business” and the wholesale killings and murders by official and unofficial “shooters” have greatly strengthened the traditional European conception of “the American”. Mention the subject of America to the average European and he immediately thinks of Al Capone and similar chieftains of open crime and killings en gros.

It is of course true that there is more crime, proportionately and absolutely, in the United States than anywhere else. Yet it is equally true that the average American is very far from the European conception about him. As a matter of fact, the notorious murders and racketeering in America have very little relation to the average American and to the great masses of the population. Moreover, there is really no such a type as the average American.

The increase of open crime in America, directly traceable to Prohibition, is by no means due to any special and strange characteristics of the genus American. It is, on the contrary, due entirely to certain special conditions created by country-wide Prohibition in a land that at heart does not believe in Prohibition as a moral issue and does not want it. Under similar conditions

— when an entire country is forced by an unpopular law to change its habitual mode of life, to deprive itself of the things and pleasures it is used to have — every country would show the same results that we see in America today. In the past this has happened in various parts of the world, among people of the most diverse character and nature. Past history gives enough proof of it, and in recent history there are also enough manifestations of this general, universal human trait. A most natural trait, of course, and socially considered a very justifiable and admirable evidence of moral strength and worth. There is neither reason nor purpose in forcing people by law to change their mode of life. If the desired change is for the better, only enlightenment and education can bring about a real and permanent change. Forcing a change by the threat of the law and punishment only results in the greatest harm. It fails to convince or persuade the people, it only compels them. Being compelled, they seek to avoid the consequences of open defiance: they do in secret what they are prohibited from doing openly. They become hypocrites, they lie and cheat; this often involves worse consequences than the original disobedience, and the result is more crime and of a more serious character. That is why the number of killings and murders have so alarmingly increased in the United States since the Prohibition law went into effect.

To the European it may seem as if the rampant crime in America is characteristic of the American make-up and nature. As a matter of fact it is characteristic only of the special condition resulting from country-wide Prohibition. Nor is it the American people as a whole that are involved in the so-called “crime wave”, as strikingly illustrated by such cities as Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and similar big centers. The people as a whole, the “average” American, is in no way directly concerned in those crimes, and he is interested in the matter only so far as any average person in Europe would be interested in it; namely, to the extent that it threatens his person or his property. It is again special social groups that are directly concerned in the whole Prohibition and crime situation in America.

I have said that there is no “average” American. That is due to the circumstance that the people of the United States differ from each as widely as the parts they live in. The New Yorker is a different specimen of man from the Westerner; the latter is entirely different again from the people of Texas. The Middle West, such States for instance as Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska or Iowa, have an entirely different psychology from that of Florida or Lower California. Their habits of life, their modes of thought, even their language is different. Still further, it must also be considered that millions of foreigners and descendants of foreign born people live in the United States and are part of the entire population that is known as “American”. Add to this more than 10 million negroes, not to mention the score of different Indian (red-skin) tribes, who are the real, indigenous Americans. In this conglomeration of races it is impossible to speak of the “average” American, nor can any adequate estimate of American psychology be made on such a basis.

In the over 100 millions of the population in the United States there is indeed a certain “type” that is directly involved in all the evils, vices and crimes, including wholesale murder, that have come as a result of Prohibition. This type is neither a social class with its particular and antagonistic interests, nor even any social group. The type is composed of members of different social strata, even of different intellectual and moral character and attitude. But they all have one particular interest in common: to make money, often great fortunes, by helping the people to break the Prohibition laws. This type has become a great powerful trust that rules the country with a power that defies the power of the United States Government. It can easily and quite safely defy it, for the simple reason that in that trust belong some of the powerful and influential officials of the Government itself, of the State Governments as well as of the Federal Government.

I am often asked how it happens that such men as Al Capone and his well-known lieutenants, whose crimes are committed in the open and almost daily, remain safe from arrest. Even racketeers of lesser prominence are seldom arrested and never sent to prison. An ordinary murderer is quickly electrocuted in America — my questioners remark, and even innocent men, like Sacco and Vanzetti, when once arrested and convicted, cannot be saved from the hangman in America. How does it happen, then — my European friends ask — that such undisguised murderers as Al Capone are not touched?

They are right in asking such a question. To the outsider, unfamiliar with the American Prohibition situation, the present conditions in the United States seem indeed incredible and impossible to explain or understand. But the answer is: the all-powerful racketeer TRUST. Al Capone has not only his army of helpers, who are from the professional criminal ranks, but his chief aids are judges, high police officials, prosecuting attorneys and members of the highest State courts. The police will not arrest him or any of his important “gun-men”, because Al Capone pays them tribute with sums that run into the thousands of dollars. At his service are judges who will liberate the Trust gangsters if they happen to be arrested, and if the popular outcry is too strong and the gangster must be tried, he will in most cases be acquitted by the “influence” of his chief Capone. It may be said now without exaggeration that for the last decade especially the United States is ruled, officially and unofficially, by men who are the staunchest upholders of Prohibition in public, but who “in their private” capacity are the mainstay of the racketeer Trust for the millions of money that is “in it”. General business may suffer as a result of the worst depression America has experienced in the past 50 years, but the Racketeer Trust is prospering. Indeed, it is growing larger and entering new fields, for today the Trust is not satisfied to draw profits from liquor only. It has branched out and is now beginning to control various other industries. But that is another story of which I may write some other time.

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