

## ■ BOOK REVIEW

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**Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, Princeton University Press, 2007, first published 1920, new foreword by Ronald Steel and new afterword by Sydney Blumenthal, ISBN 978-0-691-13480-2, XXI + 92 pp.**

To write a short book review is a difficult problem. Although the booklet itself is rather small, it contains so much political wisdom, that it is nearly impossible, to emphasize it thoroughly in a short book review. The author, a well-known political journalist, has, in the first years after World War I put to paper, what so many Americans thought of its aftermath. Being a democrat in the best sense of the word, he was instrumental in formulating the famous Fourteen Points of Woodrow Wilson. He advocated the preponderance of the executive over the legislative branch.

He quite strongly criticizes his fellow-countrymen, the Americans, for that they are willing to die for their country, but not to think for it. He also criticizes his fellow-journalists, for their most destructive form of untruth is sophistry and propaganda of it by those whose profession is to report the news. "When those who control them arrogate to themselves the right to determine by their own conscience what shall be reported and for what purpose, democracy is unworkable." (p. 7)

The author has little illusions as to the difficulty of truthful reporting. He thinks that only rarely newspapermen take the general public into their confidence, but in his opinion, they will have to do it.

In his thoughts about modern liberty of speech and opinion, he reveals to the reader that it could not rest on solid foundation. When thoughts become socially hazardous, in his opinion, men spend more time wondering about the hazards than about their own thoughts. He speculates about liberty, which, in his opinion, cannot be absolute, but only with regard to something, although the classical doctrine of it should consist of absolutes. For the modern reader it sounds somewhat odd to read, that (at the time, when the booklet was written) there existed no more fervent champions of liberty than the Russian Soviet Government.

He then cites English writers, who, in his opinion, were advocates of liberty. Among the older we find Milton, John Steward Mill, among the younger Bertrand Russel<sup>1</sup>. Of Milton, he says that he wrote the noblest plea for liberty, which exists in the English language. In a long discourse on Mill, he then comes to the conclusion that the moral of liberty is too feeble to rely on.

When he writes about peace-conferences, he thinks that reporters must seek eye-witnesses in order to know about the things, they are writing about. Then he

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1 He also cites "obstructors" of liberty, such as in his opinion Debs or Haywood.

writes quite apodictically: "Nobody saw this war" (p. 26). A very true observation is: "The news of the day as it reaches the newspaper office is an incredible medley of fact, propaganda, rumor, suspicion, clues, hopes and fears, and the task of selecting and ordering that news is one of the truly sacred and priestly offices in a democracy." (p. 28)

He closes his remarks with the prophetic sentence: "We shall advance when we have learned humility, when we have learned to seek the truth, to reveal it and publish it; when we care more for that than for the privilege of arguing about ideas in a fog of uncertainty." (p. 61)

This booklet strongly needs an afterword. It is provided by Sydney Blumenthal. But it cannot give us enough clarity in order to understand the booklet's complicated and very sophisticated content. It is absolutely necessary to read it slowly, paragraph by paragraph, in order to follow the "precocity" of Walter Lippmann. It is quite obvious, that the author would have seen today, 90 years after he wrote the pages, the same crisis of journalism. His critical remarks however, deserve attentive reading and observance. We would strongly recommend it, but: Be careful, don't read too much at a time, unless you do not want to be mingled in a plethora of philosophical remarks!

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