



Written by [Ilana Mercer](#) on April 29, 2022

How Can Mencken Appeal in the Age of the Idiot? He Can't!

H.L. Mencken, a contrarian polemicist and the consummate critic who wrote prolifically and prodigiously from 1899 until 1948, may no longer seem relevant, but the fault would not be his.

Mencken was a well-read *bon vivant* with a taste for Teutonic philosophy and a fidelity to immutable truth. He was also a brilliant satirist and a writer whose facility with the English idiom and grasp of intellectual history are unsurpassed.

How can a phenom like Mencken appeal in our age, The Age of the Idiot?

He can't: He should, but he can't.

Henry Louis Mencken cannot appeal to the bumper crops of humorless, dour “dunderheads” America is now siring. He cannot resonate with those who are afraid to question received opinion, who cannot conjugate a verb correctly, use tenses, prepositions, and adjectives grammatically and creatively, or appreciate a clever turn-of-phrase.

How can Mencken, author of *The American Language* (1919), be relevant in an America in which the rules of syntax are *passé*, pronouns are politicized and neutered, torrential prolixity is *in*, concision and precision are *out*, and “editors” excise nothing, preferring to let mangled phrases and lumpen jargon spill onto the page like gravy over a tablecloth.

Not for nothing did one wag say that the history of ideas is the history of words. And since Mencken was, first and foremost, a man of ideas (and hence, words) — no discussion of Mencken and his ideas is complete without a reference to English, the language he deployed with such verve and vim.

Thus, when “a few newspaper smarties protested” Mencken’s verbal virtuosity, Mencken tartly noted, in his Preface to *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (1949): “Thousands of excellent nouns, verbs and adjectives ... are still unfamiliar to such ignoramuses. Let them ... leave my vocabulary and me to my own customers, who have all been to school.”

Written at a considerable level of abstraction, for a prosaic people that, by Mencken’s estimation, “cannot grasp an abstraction,” a Mencken essay is certain to furrow the brow of the above-average American reader, writer, and editor nowadays. Unlike the tracts disgorged by Conservatism, Inc., the least complicated of Mencken’s editorial writings would place excessive demands on the unsupple minds of young activists, who are busy striking a selfie on social media or running to [CPUKE conferences](#).

Indeed, ideas are in retreat; and the incremental and steady “closing of the American mind” is on the march. By virtue of the unsettling, bracing originality of his ideas, Mencken is rendered as inaccessible to the American reader as an alien from deep space.



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While Mencken's libertarian acolytes and admirers focus on his disdain for The State as the leitmotif of his writings, Mencken's war on the "dishonest, insane, intolerable and tyrannical" U.S. government was, arguably, the least controversial thread in his voluminous *oeuvre*.

Mencken's grasp of government as a predatory, "regimenting" force that fleeces the citizen without flinching; that could and does "safely strip [the individual] to his hide"; a "gang well-nigh immune to punishment" — these, nowadays, are the most acceptable of Mencken's thoughts.

What would make Mencken an outcast to the turgid minds dominating the current marketplace of ideas is his disdain for the "intellectually underprivileged" American electorate, whom he called the "boobs." As Mencken saw it, *Boobus Americanus*, so easily and reliably "impressed and enchanted" by the political scoundrels, was largely to blame for why nowhere in the world was government more secure than in the United States. Americans were simply the "most timorous, sniveling, poltroonsish, ignominious mob of serfs and goose-steppers ever gathered under one flag."

"A glorious commonwealth of morons," Mencken called America. "The American moron's mind" — this "mob-man's" mentality — is that of a "violent nationalist and patriot," to whom ideas are a menace, and who would always opt "to keep his Ford, even at the cost of losing the Bill of Rights."

These are all Mencken's words, not mine.

It was Mencken against America, *then*, to paraphrase the scholar Thomas W. Hazlett. And it would be Mencken against America *today*.

More so than his anti-statism and strong, spare prose — so different from today's insipid, anemic, meandering commentary — Mencken shattered every conceivable totem and taboo of American life. It is this so-called anti-Americanism that would make Mencken unpalatable and unemployable in our times.

In a word, being a man of ideas is what would render Mencken a misfit among his countrymen. For, as Mencken saw them, Americans were congenitally and "implacably hostile to" the very things that made him tick: "novel ideas and points of view." "Everything American," mocked Mencken, is characterized by "a great distrust of ideas" and "a harsh fidelity to a few fixed beliefs," most of which Mencken derided.

Let me count the ways.

American exceptionalism? Not on your life — except as the "greatest show on earth ... a show which lays chief stress upon ... the exquisitely ingenious operations of master rogues ... clowns in constant practice."

"American values"? Aren't those fit for export? Should not America be making the world over in its image?

Are you fit to be tied? Mencken's conviction was that the "average American" is a narrow-minded chauvinist, who is wont to conflate "differentness" with "wrongness" and immorality. By extension, America's habitual manner of dealing with "foreign nations, whether friend or foe — is hypocritical, disingenuous, knavish, and dishonorable."

Christianity? Not too long ago, gingerly cleaving to Edward Gibbon's scholarship, this essayist [pondered](#) whether Christianity might be considered the Social Justice movement of its day. How subtle and respectful was that compared to Mencken's reference to Christianity as a "mob religion" that "paves heaven with gold and precious stones, i.e., with money"!



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Nevertheless, in his day, Mencken was seen as merely following his *métier* as an acidic critic; today, his heretical words on most subjects would have earned Mencken a rebuke from a prissy, Fox-empaneled gaggle of schoolmarms, called upon to expatiate about Mean Man Mencken. On second thought, today, Mencken would have been silenced by “cancel culture.”

Mencken’s views on “monogamous marriage” and the military broke the American mold as well.

The married man ends up “making machiavellian efforts to avoid kissing the everyday sharer of his meals, books, bath towels, pocketbook, relatives, ambitions, secrets, malaise and business: a proceeding about as romantic as having his boots blackened.” Find me a conservative radio mouth or TV anchor who would forgive the Maestro for that uproariously funny quip.

The American military? The “military caste,” bemoaned Mencken, in the *Minority Report*, “did not originate as a party of patriots, but as a party of bandits.” More crucially, Mencken mocked the mighty American military’s fighting prowess. Who gets away with that today?

From the riffs of outrage coming from the Democrats and their *demos* over “our democracy” betrayed, infiltrated, even destroyed, you’d never know that a rich vein of thinking in opposition to democracy runs through Western intellectual thought. It’s at its best in Mencken’s diatribe against the democratic doxology. Mencken was withering about a political dispensation that teaches that “all moral excellence, and with it all pure and unfettered sagacity, resided in the inferior four-fifths of mankind.”

Of course, Mencken was not merely politically impolite or incorrect. Rather, he pulverized every politically protected group conceivable: soldiers, sainted farmers and their subsidies, Jewish money-lenders, and Anglo-Saxons. Mencken would have infuriated with this verdict about the Anglo-Saxon: He is “the least civilized of white men and the least capable of true civilization.” His blood is “running thin,” and “he fears ideas almost more cravenly than he fears men.”

Rest assured, too, that for his use of racial epithets, the country’s professional racism-spotters would proceed against Mencken with all their sinecured mediocrity. This, even though, by the *Baltimore Sun’s* telling, Mencken did “more to help black writers — including the likes of W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson — get into mainstream print than any other white magazine editor of his day.”

Yes, Mencken helped *all* talent. Why so? For one, he was secure in his own talent unmatched. For another, Mencken toiled at a time when merit still mattered. Today, however, true talent is expunged — treated as a mortal threat to the gatekeepers and overlords of our slum-dog culture. Only in America, ventured Mencken, are such “third-rate men” in full control of the state and the “Kulture.” More so than in Mencken’s day, the mission of these “third-rate men,” today, is to preserve the *status quo* by warding off “the menace of ideas.”

In *Human Accomplishment*, Charles Murray evaluates and assesses the events and the individuals, from 800 B.C. to 1950, to have inspired humanity and dragged it out of wattle-and-daub hovels. His verdict about cultural products in the “post-1950 West”: Hardly any of “the literature, music, and visual arts of the last half century has enough substance to satisfy, over time.”

Murray’s methodologically sound findings jibe with the case made here. It is that Mencken — whose career as an American man-of-letters was meteoric, and who made a good living regaling and enraging every segment of American society — would have perished in penury had he peddled his craft in the culturally more barren half of the 20th century.



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Not prone to hyperpartisan hysteria, this writer sees Mencken as the keenest and cleverest observer of American culture. Whereas Mencken marshalled exciting, irreverent, and powerful thoughts and arguments; current commentary, by-and-large, serves up self-righteous, “pious piffle,” to quote Mencken on the cultural foot-and-mouth of his time. Right and Left, these “dull fellows” would rise on their hind legs in protest of Mencken’s systematic, analytical, and entertaining evisceration of the alpha-and-omega of American life.

Were Mencken to submit a tract to most of the popular magazines or websites, conservative or liberal, he’d have been reprimanded by a millennial or Generation-Z “editor” for being mean-spirited. He would have been told, “Thanks, but no thanks, Henry. We’ll pass.”

And “Henry” would have replied to editorial detractors as he did back in the day: Your newspaper, young pipsqueak, is “trifling, ill-informed, petty and unfair. It is full of transparent absurdities. Its editorials are ignorant and without sense. It is written in English full of *clichés* and vulgarities — English that would disgrace a manager of prize-fighters or a county superintendent of schools.”

Amen.



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