

**limbo**

Núm. 34, 2014, pp. 31-45

ISSN: 0210-1602

## Lippmann and Santayana

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyze the intellectual bond between George Santayana and Walter Lippmann and extrapolate the basic themes common to the two men. The intellectual relationship between the two, it might be argued, was essentially asymmetrical: Santayana was a decisive influence on Lippmann's development and continued to be so through his early years as a journalist — a debt Lippmann explicitly acknowledged. Conversely, Santayana never publicly recognized any affinity with the younger scholar's positions. Lippmann is rarely cited in either his memoirs or his published letters, despite Lippmann's having published works at the centre of the cultural debate, and even more rarely in terms of praise.

The main issue of this intellectual bond was the status of intellectuals in contemporary America and their participation to the social and political problems: elitisms and public opinion also were important themes for the two intellectuals.

*Key words:* philosophy, intellectuals, journalism, elitism, public opinion.

### RESUMEN

El artículo procura analizar el vínculo intelectual entre George Santayana y Walter Lippmann, así como los temas básicos en común. La relación intelectual entre ambos, puede pensarse, fue esencialmente asimétrica. Santayana influyó decisivamente en el desarrollo de Lippmann y lo hizo des-

de sus primeros años como periodista —deuda que Lippmann reconoció explícitamente. Santayana, por el contrario, no reconoció nunca públicamente ningún tipo de afinidad con las posturas del joven discípulo. Lippmann apenas aparece citado ni en sus memorias ni en sus cartas publicadas, a pesar de que los libros de Lippmann fueron centro de debates culturales, aún menos lo alaba.

El tema central de ese vínculo intelectual fue el estatus de los intelectuales en la América contemporánea y su participación en los problemas políticos y sociales: el elitismo y la opinión pública fueron también cuestiones importantes para los dos intelectuales.

*Palabras clave:* filosofía, intelectuales, periodismo, elitismo, opinión pública.

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In the years between 1907 and 1911 a short-lived but close intellectual bond was established between George Santayana (born in 1863), of Spanish origin, by then a respected lecturer in philosophy at Harvard University, and Walter Lippmann, a young student who would become one of the most famous journalists and essayists in twentieth-century America.

Lippmann, born in 1889, arrived at Harvard in the winter of 1906; two years afterwards, in 1908, he was contacted by William James, who had read a short piece of his in the university magazine. From then on until 1910, the year of his death, James invited Lippmann to his house for weekly philosophical conversations. [Steel 1999, p. 17].

Meanwhile, in the winter of 1907, Lippmann had heard Santayana lecturing on Greek philosophy, and during the same year read *The Life of Reason* and enrolled in all of Santayana's philosophy courses. When *Three Philosophical Poets* was published in 1910 Lippmann modified his degree course in order to be able to read Lucretius in Latin, Dante in Italian, and Goethe in German. Santayana was struck by his intelligence and dedication, and offered him a position as his assistant.

In the same period, however, Lippmann was also offered the chance to write for a socialist periodical, the *Boston Common*. Torn between the prospect of a university career and that of a journalist, Lippmann chose the latter and direct relations with Santayana came to an end in 1911. Santayana left Harvard for Europe the following year [Steel 1999, pp. 31-32].

An intellectual relationship continued, however, albeit at a distance. In May 1929, a few months before the Wall Street Crash and the onset of the Great Depression, Lippmann published *A Preface to Morals*, a book that embodied all the malaise of a civilization corroded by the “acids of modernity,” and proposing a new and more mature form of lay religion that expressed itself in a quasi-asceticism and detachment from material possessions. As Lippmann wrote, religion “has in all ages seemed so unapproachably high that it has been reserved for a voluntary aristocracy of the spirit” [Lippmann 1929, p. 203], an idea explicitly taken from Santayana, who is continuously cited. Like many of his other works, the book was a great success, going through six editions between May and the end of that year (1929). Santayana himself, after refusing to review it for the *New Adelphi* from his putative position of being Lippmann’s mentor, wrote: “It is with very great difficulty that I think of Lippmann as a disciple of mine” [Santayana 2002, p. 130], then published a brief article “Enduring the Truth” in *The Saturday Review*, to which Lippmann replied with his “A Footnote to Santayana.”

The intellectual relationship between the two men, it could be argued, was essentially asymmetrical: Santayana was a decisive influence on Lippmann’s development and continued to be so throughout his early years as a journalist—a debt Lippmann explicitly acknowledged. Conversely, Santayana never publicly recognized any affinity with the younger scholar’s positions. Lippmann is rarely cited in either his memoirs or his published letters, despite Lippmann’s having published works that were reviewed and critically discussed, and even more rarely in terms of praise. When Santayana met Lippmann he had already published *The Sense of Beauty* (1896)

and *The Life of Reason* (1905-1906), in which he had expounded his own conception of philosophy: a factor which was most certainly evident when he met the young Harvard student. Another factor of considerable weight was Santayana's opinion when Lippmann made the choice of journalism over philosophy, which Santayana probably viewed as a slight, if not betrayal. Lippmann's choice carried with it inevitable consequences: from 1913-14 to the mid-1960s Lippmann was at the center of the US public scene, while from post-1912 Santayana lived a life of voluntary exile, much of it spent in Rome, in a self-chosen, determined eschewal of worldliness.

The present paper will attempt to analyze the documents charting this intellectual relationship, and to discuss some basic themes common to the two men.

## I

In August 1911 Lippmann published a short article, "George Santayana. A Sketch," in the socialist review, *The International*. It can be read as an attempt to elucidate the basic tenets of Santayana's philosophy, and at the same time accounting for the fascination he exercised over a number of his students at Harvard. He begins by positing that it was precisely on account of his complex and anti-conformist nature that Santayana was by many regarded as "the Mephistophelian intellect, the head and front of Denial, the reason that insidiously destroys faith" [Lippmann 1911, p. 43]. On the other hand however

There is a very small group of men —perhaps ten in a class of four hundred— to whom Santayana is a cult. There is a physical fascination about him. For a time we used to spend hours trying to understand that fascination [Lippmann 1911, p. 43].

In analyzing the appeal Lippmann makes an intriguing comparison with William James:

William James was part of us: he belonged spiritually to a generation which knew personally the pioneers who broke ground for civilization in the West. Santayana is in no sense a pioneer. He inherits a past. He belongs to the classical tradition of Europe—to an old, rich and complex civilization [Lippmann 1911, p. 43].

As a result, while it is impossible to imagine James outside the context of the United States, characterized as it was by individualism, a trust in the common man, and the pioneering spirit, “Santayana might fit in almost any time after Plato”: in a word, most decidedly “Santayana isn’t a modern” [Lippmann 1911, p. 43]. What characterizes the moderns is, in Lippmann’s opinion, ingenuousness: the receiving of ancient truths as if they were new. The only justification for this is that the moderns are journalists, and

To be a good journalist is to understand how to insert an idea into the average man’s head. Journalism consists in stating your idea so that somebody will believe it. It is not satisfied with possessing the truth [Lippmann 1911, p. 43].

His antithesis is between, on the one hand a modernity defining an existential and intellectual position by its search for consensus and recognition, and on the other the classical world, where the quest for truth is a self-fulfilling virtue in itself. Santayana is not modern, in that he is satisfied to possess truth and feels no urge to disseminate it: indeed, a virtue he does not possess is the ability to communicate with the men of his time. He made no concessions to contemporary language and trends, but was satisfied to elucidate his own philosophy. For this reason “you feel that Santayana has made a wonderful monument only to leave it standing in the attic” [Lippmann 1911, p. 43]. What Lippmann finds more difficult is to give a positive definition of Santayana’s perspective: the fact that he disregarded the orientation of the present is in fact only one aspect of his position, albeit an important one. His conclusion is

that Santayana could be defined as a moralist in a radically different sense from that of the schematic observer of norms and prohibitions that it signified to an early twentieth-century American. Santayana was a moralist in the sense conceived by the ancient Greeks:

Morality in this sense means an appraisal of all thought and all action in terms of human happiness. *The Life of Reason*, Santayana's chief work, is an attempt at the beginning of the twentieth century to take stock of all the efforts men have made to make life happier [Lippmann 1911, p. 43].

A position of this kind involves an approach to human existence that stresses its global aspects and the profound unity behind all schematic separation of domains, thereby overcoming the division between the level of having to be and the level of being so—as one unity. Lippmann considered it a bold attempt that, although never completely realized, places Santayana in the company of Hegel, Emerson, Nietzsche, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Bernard Shaw, and James—the principal individuals to attempt an understanding of human life in its entirety.

It also explains what for Lippmann was the fascination and essential tragedy of Santayana's position. Yet while his total, unified vision of the world exercised great attraction, it also implied a detachment from specific positions, situations, and the common hopes of fellow human beings. As Lippmann writes:

There is something of the pathetic loneliness of the spectator about him. You wish he would jump on the stage and take part in the show. Then you realize that he wouldn't be the author of *The Life of Reason* if he did. For it is a fact that a man can't see the play and be in it too [Lippmann 1911, p. 43].

This basic but essential comparison between the two figures furnishes a number of significant elements towards understanding

the reasons both for Santayana's hold over Lippmann, and for the differences between them. The first element is mentioned by Lippmann at the end of his essay: Santayana's fascinating ability to observe the human stage from the outside, beyond the interests and passions of men. Lippmann is more than half convinced that this is the only way to truly grasp the questions of human existence, of history, or of politics. At the same time this perspective of complete detachment can only be reached at the cost of eschewing all specific interests and passions, and playing no part in differences and disagreements —a consequence that Lippmann was never able completely to accept. In a sense he himself embodied the antithesis, maintaining, in an interview several years later:

I have lived two lives, one of books and one of newspapers. Each helps the other. The philosophy is the context in which I write my columns. The column is the laboratory or clinic in which I test the philosophy and keep it from becoming too abstract [Reston 1968, p. 227].

The journalist and man of action are steeped in the quotidian, and in the contrast of discrete interests: the philosopher is able to retreat from this dimension in order to ponder their meaning.

The other, equally important element is that related to the link between nature and ideals: between the natural impulses and the forms of social and cultural life. Santayana emphasizes the continuity between sensibility and reason, rejecting any artificial division. The philosopher's task is to perceive the most achieved forms in which human reason have transformed the instincts: a conception, Lippmann believed, which could ultimately confer acceptance of the continuous, infinite flux of life, enabling humanity to give an affirmative answer to life. Moreover, the very awareness of the process meant that humanity could take a positive part in the flux of history while remaining essentially detached, thus basically squaring what he saw as Santayana's circle.

## II

In 1913 Lippmann published his first book, *A Preface to Politics*, followed in 1914 by *Drift and Mastery*; in the same year he also co-founded *The New Republic*, which quickly became the flagship of the progressive movement. Santayana is never mentioned in these early works, which express a criticism from within the movement. Considerable space, on the other hand, is given to James and the idea of our ability to forge a human existence; Freud is explained to American readers in the *Preface to Politics*, which stresses the idea of redirecting rather than repressing instincts: as Lippmann writes, “to erect a ban doesn’t stop the want. It merely prevents its satisfaction” [Lippmann 1913, p. 40]. The creator-politician is here opposed to the routinier precisely on account of his ability to act creatively and realize new forms of expression of human desire. James remains the protagonist in *Drift and Mastery*, in which Lippmann acknowledges the momentous change taking place in American culture. “We have lost authority”, he writes. “We are emancipated from an ordered world. We drift” [Lippmann 1961, p. 111].

We have to wait till 1921, after the traumas of WWI, to find explicit reference to Santayana. In a letter to Bernard Berenson, one of his closest friends, Lippmann intriguingly writes: “I love James more than any very great man I ever saw but increasingly I find Santayana inescapable” [Lippmann 1999, p. 21]. This would seem to imply some sort of reversion to Santayana, yet he is still given no specific mention in one of Lippmann’s most famous books, *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, and only is given one fleeting appearance in *Phantom Public*, from 1925. Yet Santayana’s presence, while never explicitly acknowledged, haunts the pages of *Public Opinion*, undoubtedly Lippmann’s most important book, centering on the awareness that in democratic societies —the great societies created by the Industrial Revolution— the individual is basically devoid of contact with the realities on which he is called upon to vote, thereby expressing the form of self-government



which characterizes democracy. Lippmann considered entirely illusory the notion that an American of the 1920s could hold a solidly fact-based opinion on choices regarding the general welfare of the country. Public opinion was formed not on facts but on images. His experience of WWI propaganda had shown Lippmann just how news could be manipulated, and how the average citizen received versions of facts not corresponding with the truth. In one of his better-known statements he had written that individuals for the most part acted on the basis not of facts, but of pictures in their heads —an affirmation which presented at the very least an obstacle to democracy. His alternative was elitism, advocating that a restricted and rigorously-trained group of journalists should be given the task of selecting from news input those items which most closely corresponded to the facts. This information would then be passed on to an equally restricted group of politicians able to act for the good of the any country.

A number of influences are certainly at work behind this theoretical solution, including that of the English Fabian Graham Wallas, who had strongly influenced him as a young man at Harvard on the more historical aspects of wartime data manipulation. Santayana, on the other hand, in the second volume of *The Life of Reason, Reason in Society*, in describing the real nature of politics, had explicitly written that “it is no loss of liberty to subordinate ourselves to a natural leader” [Santayana 1905, p. 89], and had argued in favor of different forms of leadership subsuming forms of excellence and codes of behavior vital to society as a whole. He had also thought this through to a conclusion he considered true of all elites: that they would inevitably become corrupt as private interests gradually prevailed over those of the common good —a cyclical conception of the supremacy of elites which Santayana was taking from the ancient Greeks. In his book of 1922, Lippmann seems not to have considered this inevitable drift towards corruption, although he eventually reflected on it in considerable detail, to the point of reconfiguring his entire elitist perspective.

Explicit acknowledgment of Santayana's influence was to come several years later, in his 1929 *A Preface to Morals*. Besides a number of direct quotations, the acknowledgments at the end of the volume state:

I wish I could adequately acknowledge the obligation I owe to my teachers, William James, George Santayana and Graham Wallas, though that perhaps is self-evident. [Lippmann 1929, p. 331].

Published a few months before October 1929 and the Wall Street Crash, the book again charts Lippmann's analysis of all that was wrong with American society by the late 1920s. The enormous economic development of this decade had, he claimed, radically changed both American society and individual experience, and with it the conception of individual existence. While aware of the unequal distribution of wealth, Lippmann acknowledged the historical fact that for previous generations, development and wealth had seemed limitless. Linked with this dynamic was a growing indifference to traditional values and ideals which had certainly been perceptible before the war, but which had grown considerably after the disillusionment with Wilson's universalism and abstraction of principles —after the abstract principles of Wilson's universalism— the experience of war, and the results of the peace treaties. The volume was addressed to those who, devoid of any creed or dogma, still felt the gap left by this loss of faith:

Among those who no longer believe in the religion of their fathers, some are proudly defiant, and many are indifferent. But there are also a few, perhaps an increasing number, who feel that there is a vacancy in their lives. This inquiry deals with their problem. [Lippmann 1929, p. 3].

At various points in the book Lippmann describes an existence crowded with commitments, but lacking in *commitment* or meaning:

To the modern man his activity seems to have no place in any rational order. His life seems mere restlessness and compulsion, rather than conduct lighted by luminous belief. He is possessed by a great deal of excitement amidst which, as Mr. Santayana once remarked, he redoubles his effort when he has forgotten his aim. [Lippmann 1929, p. 19].

Loss of belief in religion and traditional values is, of course, one of the characterizing features of modernity. Santayana is again quoted explicitly for his role in clarifying the process whereby what were once considered irrefutable dogmas, were now considered myths. In short, Lippmann believed that the acidic toxins of the modern age had corroded any possibility of belief, and that the increasing, obvious retreat from credible values could not be compensated by a plethora of commitments, stimuli, or consumer goods.

On the other hand, he looked rather favorably on the struggle for liberty, and had no intention of proposing a return to outworn belief-systems. This potential contradiction was synthesized to the point that while it was clear that the modern individual had ceased to believe, it was equally clear that he was still a believer, in search of some aspect of meaning with which to face the contradictions and uncertainties of history.

The search, moreover, was not to be carried out in any ideal sphere, without pressure or conditioning. Contemporary humanity is the object of the strongest imaginable social pressure: mass society, combined with public opinion, the hidden persuasion of advertising, together with conformism all push to shape him to its own ends and modes, so that "he does not feel himself to be an actor in a great and dramatic destiny, but he is subject to the massive power of our civilization, forced to adopt their pace, bound to their routine, entangled in their conflicts" [Lippmann 1929, p. 9]. Kings and priests could physically oppress the individual in past eras; mass society now oppresses the mind. Faced with this new brand of power, considerably stronger than its predecessors, but lacking their greatness and moral conviction, the modern individual lives

in conflict with its every manifestation and accepts it only under duress.

Lippmann, though no exception to this general unease and disorientation, was aware that it was a dynamic by no means new to humanity, and one which was indeed recurrent: humans of past eras had repeatedly experienced similar conflict between the beliefs of their fathers, socially-accepted conventions, and the emergence of different critiques and positions. Conversely, he also maintained that the US society of the 1920s was experiencing something completely novel. He writes: “This is the first age, I think, in the history of mankind when the circumstances of life have conspired with the intellectual habits of the time to render any fixed and authoritative belief incredible to large masses of men” [Lippmann 1929, p. 12].

This mass diffusion of criticism of the old values and all established beliefs also produced a proleptic effect unprecedented in previous history: only with extreme difficulty would twentieth-century humanity be able to invest any trust in new conventions. Previously, a period of crisis would have been followed by one of stability, whereas now Lippmann maintained that the premises for arriving once more at fixed and stable beliefs had been seriously undermined. Fascinating as it could be to direct the human spirit freely, with no fixed point of reference, it is also “hard, and only a few heroes, saints and geniuses have been the captains of their souls for any extended period of their lives” [Lippmann 1929, p. 14]. Previously, the majority of individuals had soon been able to restore their trust in some new form of authority, but the twentieth century had changed the dynamic. For many there was no way back to stability after rebelling against the old, inadequate forms: no “going home again.” The problem is that the happiness of the revolutionary is as short-lived as the passion producing it, and it disappears with the disappearance of the enemy, when it then has to turn to some new system of rules and beliefs. The young rebel against conformism and credulity-belief-systems, as they always have. This time, however, they were already disillusioned with their

own rebellion: “The acids of modernity are so powerful that they do not tolerate a crystallization of ideas which serve as a new orthodoxy into which men can retreat” [Lippmann 1929, pp. 19-20].

I have dwelt on this part of Lippmann’s *œuvre* as that which best encapsulates the anguish of a whole generation of intellectuals that, as stated above, had burnt its bridges with the past without finding any grand projects for the future: the “lost generation.”

The second part of *A Preface to Morals* considered how to create a positive perspective, and here reference to Santayana is even more explicit. Lippmann summarizes the trajectory traced in the first part of the book, and then locates two different positions. The first is that of “popular religion”: the still common tendency among the common people to believe that the Kingdom of God was a historical fact — a position which could only see the corrosive doubts engendered by the modern age view as an negative betrayal of faith. The second is that of the modern spirit which considers the Kingdom of God as a grand narrative: a myth produced by humanity’s needs and desires.

He also defines as a humanistic conception that which, while accepting the modern critique of the historical basis of religion, still asks itself “how mankind, deprived of the great fictions, is to come to terms with the needs which created those fictions” [Lippmann 1929, p. 144]. This conception, sustained by Lippmann, is based on psychology and man’s interpretation of reality. The fundamental question, then, is how to find an alternative to the human need to believe.

The humanistic conception of reality was for Lippmann characterized by its realistic approach to human nature. Popular religion considered it as torn by passions: violent, egotistical, and unruly. As such, it encourages the idea, stridently expressed by the various religions, that these passions and impulses need to be subjugated by tradition, reason, and the religions themselves.

The modern age, on the other hand, has asserted the basic benevolence of human nature, thwarted only by unfavorable

external circumstances. This is a conception shared, according to Lippmann, albeit with a different emphasis, by American liberalism, which argues for the need to remove all obstacles to expression. He also thought that criticism of the artificial and oppressive forms in which a culture can manifest itself, while totally understandable, should never become so radical as to deny the possibility of setting any limit on the individual's passions. The continuing fascination of the great saints and heroes is due precisely to the ability they have shown in controlling their passions and subjugating immediate satisfactions to some higher ideal and more elevated realization of human potential.

For these reasons, and against the idea that happiness is the result of liberalizing the passions, what he proposes is a new form of liberalism centered not on the idea of the natural goodness of human nature, but on a realistic conception of the individual. This should be predicated on self-control of the “devises and desires” of the heart: a new form of asceticism. As he puts it, “when asceticism is rational, it is a discipline of the mind and body to fit men for the service of an ideal” [Lippmann 1929, p. 160] — a superior form of the religious sense available only, as already seen, to a restricted spiritual aristocracy.

This idea of a spiritual aristocracy and lay asceticism derives directly from Santayana. In his short commentary on Lippmann's book Santayana clearly distances himself from its proposals, and while he defines it as “admirable,” his overall judgment is that “the pure intellect is divorced as far as possible from the service of the will — divorced, therefore, from affairs and from morality; and love is divorced as far as possible from human objects, and becomes an impersonal and universalized delight in being” [Santayana 1929, p. 512].

Santayana accused Lippmann of proposing a high-minded, intellectual position: namely, of being unable to overcome the opposition between impulse and reason, although this had always been one of Lippmann's objectives. His attempt to describe the flux

of facts through the use of objective analysis while simultaneously taking part in it (the prevalence of impulse) once more finds a critic in Santayana.

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