

## IN A COFFE POT

Alfred Hayes

Tonight, like every night, you see me here  
Drinking my coffee slowly, absorbed, alone.  
A quiet creature at a table in the rear  
Familiar at this evening hour and quite unknown.  
The coffee steams. The Greek who runs the joint  
Leans on the counter, sucks a dead cigar.  
His eyes are meditative, sad, lost in what it is  
Greeks think about the kind of Greeks they are.

I brood upon myself. I rot  
Night after night in this cheap coffee pot.  
I am twenty-two I shave each day  
I was educated at a public school  
They taught me what to read and what to say  
The nobility of man my country's pride  
How Nathan Hale died

And Grant took Richmond.

Was it on a summer or a winter's day?

Was it Sherman burned the Southland to the sea?

The men the names the dates have worn away

The classes words the books commencement prize

Here bitter with myself I sit

Holding the ashes of their prompted lies.

The bright boys, where are they now?

Fernando, handsome wop who led us all

The orator in the assembly hall

Arista man the school's big brain.

He's bus boy in an eat-quick joint

At seven per week twelve hours a day.

His eyes are filled with my own pain

His life like mine is thrown away.

Big Jorgensen the honest, blonde, six feet,

And Daniels, cunning, sly,—all, all—

You'll find them reading Sunday's want ad sheet.

Our old man didn't know someone

Our mother gave no social teas

You'll find us any morning now

Sitting in the agencies.

You'll find us there before the office opens  
Crowding the vestibule before the day begins  
The secretary yawns from last night's date  
The elevator boy's black face looks out and grins.  
We push we crack our bitter jokes we wait  
These mornings always find us waiting there  
Each one of us has shined his broken shoes  
Has brushed his coat and combed his careful hair  
Dance hall boys pool parlor kids wise guys  
The earnest son the college grad all, all  
Each hides the question twitching in his eyes  
And smokes and spits and leans against the wall.

We meet each other sometimes on the street  
Sixth Avenue's high L bursts overhead  
Freak shows whore gypsies hotdog stands  
Cajole our penniless eyes our bankrupt hands.  
"Working yet?" "The job aint come  
Got promised but a runaround."  
The L shakes building store and ground  
"What's become of Harry? and what's become  
Of Charley? Martinelli? Brooklyn Jones?"

"He's married—got a kid—and broke."

"And Charley's on Blackwell's, Martinelli's through—

Met him in Grand Central—he's on the bum—

We're all of us on the bum—"

A freak show midget's pounding on a drum

The high L thunders redflag auctioneers

Are selling out a bankrupt world—

The hammer falls—a bid! a bid!—and no one hears...

The afternoon will see us in the park

With pigeons and our feet in peanut shells.

We pick a bench apart. We brood

And count the twelve and thirteen tower bells.

What shall we do? Turn on the gas?

Jump a bridge? Boxcar west?

It's all the same there's nothing anywhere

A million guys are sitting on their ass

We always land

Back where we started from—a parkbench,

Cold, and spitting in the sand.

Who's handing us a runaround?

We hold our hands for sale arms brain

Eyes taught to figure accurate ears

We're salesmen clerks and civil engineers

We hang diplomas over kitchen sinks

Our toilet walls are stuck with our degrees

The old man's home no work and we—

Shall we squat out our days in agencies?

Or peddling socks shoelaces ties?

We wrench green grassblades up with sudden hands

The failing sun is doubled in our asking eyes...

And evening comes upon us there

Fingering in the torn pocket of our coat

The one cold nickel of our subway fare...

Night after night in this cheap coffee pot

I brood upon our lives. I rot. They rot.

The Greek's awakened from his dream. The dead cigar

Drops ash. He wipes the coffee bar.

He goes to fill the boiler once again.

The clock hand moves. A fly soars down

And stalks the sugar bowl's bright rim.

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And I compare myself with him—this fly and I—  
He crawls head downwards down a peeling wall

And I crawl after him.

You ask "Tomorrow?"...Go ask Fernando in the eat-quick joint.

Ask Jorgensen pounding Sixth Avenue. Ask Martinelli too,

Watching the hole enlarging in his shoe.

And ask me here—alone with the crawling flies—

And I...I have seen the pain there in their eyes.

We shall not sit forever here and wait.

We shall not sit forever here and rot.

The agencies are filing cards of hate.

And I have seen how men lift up their hands

And turn them so and pause—

And so the slow brain moves and understand—

And so with million hands.

—*"In a Coffee Pot"* appeared in the first issue of *Partisan Review* (February–March 1934). Alfred Hayes was on the editorial board of *Partisan Review* and was a member of the John Reed Club and the Young Communist League.

## 1930—THE DECADE IN MINIATURE

Dilvo I. Ristoff

The Empire State Building and the breadlines are perhaps the best examples of the contradictions of the American society of the year 1930. Both were “begun” before the 1929 stock-market crash, at a time when money was as largely available as things to be bought, when confidence in the economic system still existed, and when spending and consuming more than needed were no ugly words. After the October 1929 downright collapse of the stock market, the breadlines did horizontally what the Empire State Building had been doing vertically: both grew bigger and bigger to the astonishment of the nation. The Empire State Building would “open its doors on emptiness” and would have no jobs to offer; the men in the breadlines had empty stomachs and were desperately looking for jobs. But, it was perhaps the hope to do away with all this emptiness that managed to find a common ground for these symbols of grandeur and smallness, of splendor and humbleness, of dignity and shame, of power and powerlessness, of wealth and poverty. That both symbols should become associated with the same year only seemed to confirm the irony and the tragedy of a system in which wealth depended on

poverty and extreme wealth on extreme poverty, as if the standing tall of some required the rest of society to crawl.

After a period of prosperity and abundance, few Americans could believe in the disastrous consequences of the depression that had just begun. Some just were too privileged to try to understand it or worry about its impact; others either lacked the knowledge to explain the cyclic nature of capitalistic depressions (1837, 1857, 1877, 1893, 1903, 1921) or lacked the power, the influence, or the interest to do something about it. Thus, capitalist society once again followed its course, and only true luminaries could have foreseen in 1930 that a whole decade of extreme economic difficulties was ahead, and that the way out of them would be another world war.

In 1930, the national economic and social problems of the United States of America were so many that the German elections, in which the "Nazis gained 107 seats from the center parties," had no meaning at all. There were more urgent matters to attend to: the Empire State Building had most of its rentable space vacant and depended on tourists to pay for its taxes; the breadlines were still getting longer ("something like a hundred thousand meals a day were consumed in New York on breadlines" (Bendiner: 15) and thicker, and the "Hoovervillers" were proliferating by the dozens. The priorities of the country at such a time somehow had to be nationally oriented.

Although President Hoover, on May 1st, 1930, declared that



"we have now passed the worst," the situation continued to deteriorate. Banks continued to close their doors; industries were running out of market for their products (industrial production declined 51%), dismissing their workers and closing down; farmers could not sell their products, and, when they finally did find buyers, the prices were so low that it became more profitable to simply destroy their products. As late as December, the Bank of the United States—with sixty branches in New York City and four hundred thousand depositors, closed its doors, bringing the total of banks closed during 1930 up to one thousand three hundred, clearly demonstrating that, contrary to what President Hoover was saying, the worst was yet to come.

Farmers were perhaps the hardest hit—both by market conditions (grain and cotton prices dropped steadily throughout the year) and by the unprecedented summer drought, especially in the Midwestern states. The farmers' income, which had already significantly declined since 1921, declined from \$11,900,000,000 in 1930 to \$5,300,000,000 in 1933. As a consequence, unemployment was now estimated at around 5,000,000 people—a rather small number when compared to the 12,634,000 unemployed three years later, when one out of every four people in the labor force was unemployed.

The decline was steady and, between 1930 and 1933, "the Gross National Product (GNP), the total of all goods and services produced each year, fell from \$104,400,000,000 to \$74,200,000,000,

setting back the GNP per capita rate twenty years" (Loos: 1582).

As many people pointed out, things stood somewhat like this: having no jobs, people were unable to buy; being unable to sell, industries and farms would not produce; Without production there was no job market; without a job market unemployment soared. It was a vicious circle, and somebody would have to do something somewhere.

People like Henry Ford thought that the solution was to reduce prices so that people could buy more. He ran an add throughout the year, in the *New York Times*, expressing that "the Ford Motor Company believes that basically the industry and business of the country are sound. Every indication is that general business conditions will remain prosperous. We are reducing prices now because we feel that such a step is the best contribution that could be made to assure a continuation of good business throughout the country" (Hopkins: 138). This add was followed by a list of cars and their old and new prices—the reductions varying from \$15 to \$200. But, despite his "good intentions" very soon Ford Motor Company would dismiss 75,000 more from its Detroit factory.

Other people thought that increased buying would not be enough and proposed a more nationalistic approach: "buy American." As Bendiner says, most people would have gladly bought American if buying itself had not become an economic extravagance, except, obviously, for people like Hearst, "who went on importing

antiques from all over the world, and Venetian tiles for his indoor swimming pool at San Simeon" (Bendiner: 23). These contradictions reveal the whole absurdity of the approach.

While Hoover was blaming lack of confidence for the economic catastrophe, his wife suggested that it was all a matter of bad luck. "If all who just happened not to suffer this year would just be friendly and neighborly with all those who just happened to have bad luck, we'll all get along better" (Bendiner: 6)—this was her advice. If all the "justs" of her advice had anything to do with understanding of what is socially just, her husband's policy might have been more aggressive and avoided great part of the economic hardships that followed.

Hoover, however, seemed to share Henry Ford's belief that times would be better once confidence was back and if Americans just tried hard enough. Furthermore, he believed that the government should not get involved in job-creating investments. These efforts, he thought, should come from municipalities, charity organizations, churches, communities, and the like. Many of these efforts became, in fact, well known, such as Mr. Zero's daily processions down Broadway, Mr. Glad's coffee, sandwiches, and little cards "pointing out that the digits of 1930 added up to 13, which was true of other such depressions as 1903, 1912, and 1921" (Bendiner: 15). Also the Salvation Army unemployment offices, the San Franciscan Fathers, Tammany Hall, and the New York City itself were actively trying to

act according to the neighborly ways of Mrs. Hoover and according to the President's suggestions. But, it was clearly not enough. The President would have to think of another kind of medicine if indeed he wanted to save the patient.

Hoover had, in fact, already in January discussed an increase in public works program with congressional leaders, and, on March 1931, the Public Buildings Act was passed, extending appropriation for erection of public buildings, and on April 4, he allocated another \$300,000,000 to aid state road building. All these efforts during the first half of the year, even though they meant temporary relief and employment for significant numbers of people, seemed to be undone by the Hawley-Smoot Tariff Bill, signed by Hoover on June 17. The act provided for rates higher than ever, tariffs which according to J. G. E. Hopkins, would only mean the closure of European markets to American products. It is important to stress that Hoover signed the bill, despite a petition signed by 1,028 economists, demanding presidential veto.

The drought of that summer complicated things even further, forcing Hoover to meet the governors of drought states. The meeting was in August and it came to mean, on December 20, the allocation of another \$45,000,000 of drought relief money to these states.

Slowly his policies of relief became more aggressive. In October, he installed the PCUR (President's Committee for Unemployment Relief), after learning that unemployment had soared up to an

official 4,500,000 people. On December 2, in his annual message to Congress, Hoover asked for an appropriation of from \$100,000,000 to \$150,000,000 for construction of public works to provide employment. On December 20, \$116,000,000 were authorized.

But Hoover's slowness had already cost him and the GOP a political price that would be difficult to pay. It would actually weaken the Republican Party throughout the decade. His choking defeat to Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 was determined on November 4, 1930, when the Democrats won majority in the House and Franklin Delano Roosevelt was re-elected Governor of New York by "such a margin that James A. Farley thinks he can't escape becoming the next presidential nominee of his party, to which the Governor replies: "Whatever you say, Jim, is all right with me" (Bendiner: 253).

Thus, 1930, the year that saw the Empire State Building growing towards the sky, the year in which astronomers discovered planet Pluto, the year in which some of the finest cars were built, the year in which Thomas Edison tried out the first electric passenger train, and 100,000,000 Americans (the population was 122,775,046) went to movies every week, this same year is also the year of thickening breadlines, apple vendors, "bankrupt merchants, foreclosed farmers, evicted tenants" (Bendiner: 25). The year had started bad and ended worse. So bad, in fact, that in 1931, for the first time in American history, the number of emigrants from the United States exceeded that of the immigrants. But, it is naive to believe that

it was bad for everybody. It was bad for labor—especially bad for labor. But, as Robert Bendiner, in his book *Just Around the Corner*, tells us, the hardships of the rich were, to say the least, a joke. Their hardships hardly even went beyond such extravagances as having to spend less on South American butterflies for their daughter's fifteenth birthday balls, or maybe it meant simpler garden parties or dinners on their Long Island estates, away and safe from the populace. No wonder, then, that Bendiner chose to open his book with Dickens's portrait of the paradoxical era of *A Tale of Two Cities* to characterize the Thirties: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going the other way..."—all depended on if you were standing on the observation platforms of the Empire State Building or in a breadline. The first year of the Thirties contains the whole contradictions of the decade. In many ways, 1930 is the decade in miniature.

**Works Cited**

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## HUNGER

"Lady Bountiful," who fed 2,000 to 3,500 men daily on the Bowery. (*Literary Digest*, Feb. 14, 1931)

"Mr. Zero" serving food on Thanksgiving Day, 1931. (*UPI*)



Appleseller, 1930. (*UPI*)