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PSP

Radio and Motion
Pictures

February 17, 1939

Dear Charles:

I wish I might have got a reply to your letter of February 1st about my memorandum on the Queen Mary's return trip, but, as she got in late, there simply wasn't time for it. So I am getting this on the Aquitania tomorrow as the next best mail available.

First of all let me say how deeply I appreciate the *close* study you gave this memorandum. As you know, I showed it to you necessarily in confidence, knowing that what you did say of it would be more valuable to me than the comments of anyone else I could think of. What you have written fully justifies that expectation.

Your summary of what I tried to say seems to me to involve no misinterpretation whatever. In fact, you have stated the main points certainly much more clearly than I did.

^{my} The only element of misinterpretation is really not there, but rather my failure to explain the use for which this particular memorandum was intended; namely, to point out that there were certain basic studies which I felt it quite appropriate for an organization like ours to undertake. Lacking this explanation, your general comments on the memorandum were certainly fair to make. What they do for me is to confirm strongly my own feelings about action necessary to bring into use whatever came out of this fundamental work. Action there must be, but you would be the first to agree that whatever action there is ought to be as intelligently guided as is possible. I suspect you likewise agree that action couldn't be wholly intelligent without such a basis as this fundamental "academic research" would provide.

As for the size of the task, I fully agree, but I can explain my feeling on that score by quoting two remarks: the first, which you probably know, is attributed to Bertrand Russell, who I believe said that anyone enlisting in a war must renounce all hope of seeing accomplished the things he was willing to fight for; the second one is attributed to the Talmud "Ours only to begin, someone else's to finish". Surely you wouldn't discourage any beginning that can be made.

As you suspect, we actually have in mind other concrete beginnings than the one instanced in this memorandum, and I hope to press on with these other concrete approaches as rapidly as we can.

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Then again, I don't at all feel that this fundamental approach necessarily ~~precludes~~ present application and experiment. In fact, my feeling is that the two should run parallel, drawing on each other as they advance - as I hope indeed they are beginning to in both film and radio.

Actually I, of course, feel as you do the terrific urgency of our times, but we see so much in this country that is dedicated merely to action that I feel that urgency equally as great for intelligent guidance in action. And in our experience, despite the fact that action as you say has to be empirical, action craves guidance when it sees that guidance makes for better action. This fortunately is increasingly true of both our broadcasters and film makers. The more intelligent of them begin to feel how amateur their procedures are and how much they need guiding principles which can help them make their work more genuinely professional.

This, then, leads to your third point. As I have indicated, I did not take up in this memorandum how the outcomes of fundamental work can be brought into use. I have already partly sketched my feelings about that. They may be too optimistic, but let me sum them up. The demands this country is making of both radio and film cannot leave our broadcasters and film makers entirely without interest in the ends my memorandum implies. In fact, they have a certain selfish interest in them because of these demands (our broadcasters, you know, among themselves speak of so-called educational programs as insurance - insurance that they can in the future retain their franchise). It may turn out that the threat of government control or further supervision will prove in this country more really effective than actual control or censorship. In other words, though I quite recognize the dangers of optimism, perhaps we have here some "inward and inevitable logical compulsion to act according to the facts" which you minimize. To be concrete: I anticipate little difficulty in securing the attendance of even the most prominent broadcasters and film makers at the second conference on the interpretation of science, which I allude to in the memorandum. I am somehow equally confident that those who come won't go away without being influenced. I may be wrong, but the hopefulness of this procedure is such that it has at least to be tried.

If some such exposure doesn't work, other methods will have to be thought of. But it doesn't seem to me that an organization like ours should even think of direct action until other means have been proven

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ineffective. Even in that event, it seems to me most questionable if an organization such as ours should take direct action: after all, it is one servant of society and, if society isn't ready for or so organized as to take advantage of the better things it could have, action to remedy that probably has to originate in society itself.

Though I may have to share your skepticism that knowledge and reason will triumph, I can't feel that that skepticism has a proper place in planning at a fundamental level. What I would like to feel I have in this memorandum is an intelligent platform for action. Only with that can I believe I should be justified under any circumstances to think of using what are undoubtedly the really effectual means of influence that are available for use today, means that gain their ends primarily through emotion and conviction - and those only if it is demonstrated that the ends this memorandum implies can't otherwise be achieved.

Perhaps your penultimate paragraph tracks down whatever basic difference of opinion separates us. "The world of value stands", I agree, but aren't the values in that world undergoing change, and have any of us the right to stand in public life and public responsibility for values we hold without scrutinizing the changes they are undergoing? The cry is here to maintain democracy. The question I feel faced with is rather what there is in present day democracy we must stand out to keep. Isn't it quite possible that to stand out for keeping democracy just as it is may prove an impediment to a better and more workable social organization than what we now have? Certainly we feel the expense of giving up some things we cherish too great to tolerate their loss, but that is an expense to us as individuals. What may the expense of keeping them be to society? It seems to me that we all have to weigh relatively the values here involved, if we are to avoid becoming the Tories of our generation.

I have to mark this letter private and personal because ordinarily I couldn't write as frankly as I have about questions that are after all official concerns. But, after all the time and thought you gave in formulating the comments you have sent me, I feel obligated to make myself a little clearer, as I hope this letter does. What you wrote makes it difficult to accept the conclusion suggested in your postscript: how could a sane man feel otherwise in the sick world

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in which you have to live. I wish you didn't have to live there.

Yours sincerely,

JOHN MARSHALL

Mr. Charles Siepmann⁰
British Broadcasting Corporation
London, England

JM:EA