The Inhumane Businessman

“A man is seldom more innocently occupied than when he is engaged in making money,” said Dr. Samuel Johnson. But he may be cheating himself, says an observer of modern American money-makers.

By Russell Kirk

American businessmen are inhumane. I do not mean that they are inhuman; they are all too human. I do not mean that they are insufficiently humanitarian. I mean that American businessmen, like most other Americans, are deficient in the disciplines that nurture the spirit. They are largely ignorant of the humanities, which, in a word, comprise that body of great literature that records the wisdom of the ages, and in recording it instructs us in the nature of man. The humanist believes in the validity of such wisdom.

Let us be quite clear about the difference between humanism and humanitarianism. In common usage, humanitarianism has simply come to mean generosity or charity; but strictly defined, as a system of thought, humanitarianism is a belief that mankind can be improved through the application of utilitarian principles, without divine aid; this is the idea that Rousseau pursued ecstatically and Stalin ruthlessly, while they overlooked the human law. Now there are a great many benevolent humanitarians among us who are neither ecstatic nor ruthless. The American businessman by and large is a benevolent humanitarian. In fact, probably no class of businessmen in all history has been so openhanded and so full of social conscience. So I do not mean to say that the American businessman is selfish when I say that he is not humane. But he misunderstands the limited virtues and even the profound hazards of humanitarianism so long as he neglects, as he does, the wisdom of humanism.

“The triumph of technology”

Humanism is a discipline that traces its origins back to the Hebrew prophets and the Greek philosophers, and has existed ever since to humanize men. Cicero and Seneca and Marcus Aurelius were at once the Roman exemplars and the Roman preceptors of this humanizing process, for which our term is “a liberal education.” The humanists believed that through the study of great lives and great thoughts the minds of earnest men could be molded nobly. The process was both intellectual and ethical. This humane discipline, passed along in the literature of Christian theology, classic philosophy, poetry, history, biography, dominated the thinking of the whole of the Western world—until very late in the nineteenth century. Humanism persists today, but with influence greatly weakened.

The leaders of society in medieval Europe, the landed proprietors and the clergy, were trained in these humane disciplines. And later, the burghers of the Low Countries, the bankers of Lombardy and Tuscany, the manufacturers of England, aspired to know and to patronize humane letters and arts. The founders of the American Republic were practical and bold men; but they also were humane men, influenced by the classic tradition. The model for the American Republic was the Roman Republic, modified by the English political experience; the models for American leadership were Plutarch’s heroes.

But with the successive industrial revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with what Friedrich Juenger calls “the triumph of technology,” this veneration of humane learning began to disappear—especially among businessmen in America. Applied science, “positivism,” seemed to be the keys to complete power. Powerful voices were raised then in disparagement of the humanites and in praise of “efficiency,” “pragmatism,” “progress.” The School of Business Administration pushed the Schools of Theology and Classical Studies into a dim corner. People asked impatiently: Why waste years in school over Cicero?

A people can live upon their moral and intellectual capital for a long time. Yet eventually, unless the capital is replenished, they arrive at cultural bankruptcy. The intellectual and political and industrial leaders of the older generation die, and their places are not filled. The
humanitarian cannot substitute for the humane man. The result of such bankruptcy is a society of meaninglessness, or a social revolution that brings up radical and unscrupulous talents to turn society inside out.

The young men who are to govern our industry and, to a considerable extent, our public policy, are in the condition of Aristotle’s slaves, actually disqualified by the necessity of unremitting labor from taking part in public affairs. When they are in their sixties, they may have time for reflection and public service. But there are disadvantages to society in being led by emancipated slaves.

It is not easy to humanize oneself at the age of sixty. And not many businessmen do; the disciplines of humane studies, easily acquired in childhood, are thoroughly tedious in old age. Furthermore, the mortality rate among retired businessmen is notoriously high, perhaps in part because they lack the consolations of philosophy and the relaxation of purely intellectual pursuits.

The pity is that most of our businessmen are unaware of the fact that they are missing anything; they fail to appreciate how much of their intellectual power is wasted in getting and spending. Getting and spending are in themselves generally commendable activities; as Dr. Johnson said, “A man is seldom more innocently occupied than when he is engaged in making money.” But that production and promotion should have become the whole of life for so many of the best minds in our country is unjust to the businessman, who deserves a better reward.

**Underprivileged businessmen**

He is the underprivileged man. In an age of abundant production, when the problems of mass leisure are becoming more pressing than the problems of mass production, business executives are working harder and more single-mindedly than ever before. Nobody talks seriously about the four-day week for the executive. I am not proposing that the executive knock off in the middle of the week and take an adult-education course. But the original schooling of young men who will go into business ought to cultivate those tastes and provide those disciplines that enable the pleasures of a humane consciousness to make their way naturally and gracefully into even the busiest adult career. Businessmen would probably live longer as a result, and they certainly would live better.

Businessmen who were trained in law do stand out, on occasion, from their inhumane colleagues. Although our law schools have a good many deficiencies, anyone who goes to a reputable law school will have to know some Latin, a good deal of history, and even a smattering of philosophy. The best lawyers, busy as they are, can sometimes be found reading. Many of them read poetry, theology, the classics, philosophy, history.

Banking, too, still has its well-read men, though most of them seem to belong to the generation that is passing. The way things are going, we shall not have many well-read bankers around for long. For in banking as well as manufacturing or selling, the executive now is the least-leisured man in the world.

Much of the so-called business training at secondary, college, and even graduate-school levels is obsolete and burdensome. I doubt whether our technical and commercial and specialized curriculums really accomplish much except to shoulder aside those humane disciplines that equip a man for the private life of the mind and generally prepare him to do any kind of intelligent work.

“Business courses” at the secondary-school level are almost wholly useless, except for teaching young men how to typewrite and keep simple books. Business courses in college—except so far as they are courses in law or political economy in disguise—are worse than useless, for they fill up those short four years that are the best time to get some grasp of general principles of human nature and rational thinking. A graduate school of business administration may be a different matter, if the graduate students have already spent four years in genuinely humane studies. Yet many of the courses taught in graduate schools of business are trying to reduce to abstraction what
can be got only by experience. And a large number of the students at graduate schools of business have had no proper preparation at all in humane studies. They can graduate from the business school innocent of ethical principle or decent tastes.

**The inhumane teachers**

The inhumane dean and the inhumane professor must share some responsibility for the inhumane businessman. Now and then I lunch with an investment broker who knows his Shakespeare and Dryden and Addison. (Graduate schools of business were not the fad when he was young, so he spent his time making money at an early age, and his spare time reading good books, mostly at random.) He likes to talk to professors occasionally, so that he can find out what professors are like nowadays. Generally he finds them overspecialized and overdogmatic. At a dinner not long ago he sat next to a professor of education, a genius my friend had not inspected before.

“Do you think,” said the investment broker to the professor of education, “that young people are better educated now than they were in 1900?”

The professor of education did indeed think so: ever so much better educated; integrated with the group; adjusted to the environment. “I had wondered about it,” the investment broker said, “because when I bring young men into my office, I generally find that they cannot write decent letters, or understand an alphabetical filing system.” It is carrying on-the-job training rather far to expect a business to teach its employees the alphabet.

**Imagination rules business**

But the importance of humane disciplines to the functioning of industry and commerce transcends the simple skills of literacy. For even if the humanities are chiefly important to a man’s soul and the higher purposes of life, it ought to be noted they are good for profits, too. One of the ends of a liberal education is to fit a person for whatever lot may happen to be his; and some of the accomplishments of the humane discipline, though that system developed in an age considerably different from ours, are remarkably important to the management of the modern economy.

A person truly educated in the humane tradition should have an orderly and disciplined mind—so far as any system of training can bring order into private personality. He has been taught the relationship between cause and effect. He should understand that predictable consequences follow from particular actions. He has in his mind a fund of precedent. He is acquainted with system. He has been taught a respect for just authority, and that the ego must be kept in check. The complexities of modern business require precisely those habits of thought that a liberal education has been trying to inculcate in young men these several centuries.

The sheer variety of the ideas that the liberal-arts man has explored can be counted upon to give him a resourcefulness generally superior to that of the man who has had only a technical training. Larger possibilities occur to the liberal intellect. Technique, as such, breeds only refinements of existing technique. Imagination rules the world, Napoleon said. Business imagination is not the highest form of imagination; but it certainly rules business in a competitive economy.

It could be argued that a degree in the humanities is even some added guarantee of integrity. The end of the old humanistic schooling, as I mentioned, is ethical: a man seeks virtue through philosophy. There are dishonest intellectuals, just as there are dishonest fools. It is a Latin poet who tells us that a man may perceive the good path and the evil, and yet choose the evil almost against his will, and certainly against his reason; there are no absolute sureties against a fall from virtue. But after reading the philosophers and the prophets and the poets, a man at least must be ashamed of misconduct, for he knows surely what misconduct is.
Liberal education cannot substitute for native shrewdness and knowledge of the ways of the world, but it can supplement and elevate such worldly wisdom. The humane man is able to appreciate human hopes and motives. He has some idea of the complexity and subtlety of the human heart. If he has learned his lessons, he is not likely to think of his own prejudices as universal aspirations, or put a utopian faith in his associates. He probably has taken on a healthy pessimism about the possibilities of human nature. He should know fairly well what may be expected of a man.

He is better prepared to deal with “personnel relations” than the young zealot fresh from courses in Freudian or behavioristic psychology, who immoderately applies the speculations of the clinician to situations and personalities that may require nothing more than a sprinkling of good humor.

**B.S. in packaging**

Yet the doors of business and industry are too often closed to the liberal-arts graduate. In part, this is the result of an attitude manifested by certain businessmen who think of all education as “training” for a special vocation, and therefore expect to employ “trained” people for narrow specialties. And in part, it is the fault of educational administrators who pander to “the needs of industry” by setting up wondrously technical or even manual curriculums—and expect subsidies and gifts from business by way of reward. One state university now offers a “four-year curriculum in packaging, leading to the degree of bachelor of science in packaging.” (The same university offers two courses, with full credit, in fly casting.) “There is nothing to which we will not stoop,” says the president of a famous state university, “if the public seems to demand it.”

The businessman with any concern for the future of business or the Republic would be well advised to set his face against these absurdities rather than encourage them.

**The businessman in politics**

We hear a good deal about businessmen in politics, and some of it to the effect that politics is something they have no business being in. Edmund Burke, though he always was supported by the greater part of the industrial and commercial interests of England, did not trust businessmen as statesmen; on one occasion he said that men of commerce were not at all fit to judge of the high concerns of state. The late Robert Taft more than once expressed his annoyance at the notion that the U.S. needed “a businessman’s government.” Businessmen, he said, should take care of business, and politicians should take care of politics.

Nevertheless, the businessman does matter in American politics, and he has an important role to play, whether he likes it or not. Many businessmen definitely do not like it; they are busy, and they know when they are out of their element. We hear a lot about the political power of U.S. business, but the country suffers far more from the political indifference of the businessman than from his alleged political influence.

The businessman has to be concerned with our public policy. Whoever possesses money and influence must play a large role in politics, or else he will not keep money and influence long.

And it is in politics that the businessman without humane disciplines is most conspicuously at a disadvantage. If ignorant of history and political theory and the record of human nature, he may fall victim to the sentimental humanitarian, or worse still, to the zealot for social collectivism. Vaguely eager to be approved by the Advanced Social Thinker, disturbed by denunciations from radical and liberal publications, the inhumane businessman may become a party to his own undoing.
The radical man of action is aware of this weakness of the businessman. More than a generation ago, G. Lewes Dickinson, a British man of letters who happened to be an ardent Socialist, informed his friends that they could count upon the conquest of businessmen without a struggle; it would simply entail, said Dickinson, a “slow, half-conscious detachment of all of them who have intelligence and moral force from the interest and active support of their class.” The Robber Barons did some damage in their day; but the possibilities of damage to our social structure by confused and sentimental humanitarians may be even greater.*

If businessmen don’t assume some political leadership, leaders of a disagreeable and violent sort will make themselves felt in the field. Burke described Jacobinism, the fierce radicalism of France, as “the revolt of the enterprising talents of a country against its property.” Jacobinism lies latent in any generation or country. But the possessors of property must be fortified by the councils of humane disciplines. It will do no good for them to flail around in the political arena simply repeating slogans about “the American way of life,” or “the American standard of living.”

**The accidental leaders**

If only by accident, the American businessman has come to be the chief guardian of our civil and cultural inheritance. It is not altogether convenient to have greatness thrust upon one. Yet the American businessman owes it to himself, his economic system, and his country to shoulder such responsibilities. I do not expect that any considerable proportion of the business community will set out overnight to read Plato through. We can hope that some of our businessmen will begin to pay some heed to the springs of imagination and reason and open their minds to our intellectual heritage. Professor Wilhelm Röpke, the Swiss economist and social philosopher, recently suggested that nowhere is the gulf between the man of property and the man of intellect wider than in the U.S. This is a perilous condition.

* A number of our great private charitable foundations are committed not to collectivism, as their adversaries often cry, but to a vague, well-intentioned humanitarianism, looking toward the perfection of society and human nature. Almost any sum of money can be got for almost any “social research project,” or plan for material amelioration. But the men running our foundations, taken as a body, seem quite indifferent to the ethical and intellectual premises of the humane tradition.

---

**About the Author**

Russell Kirk is an intellectual with a prejudice toward conservatism. Four years ago he wrote The Conservative Mind, which traced the long road of conservatism from Edmund Burke to the present day, a road that Kirk finds now reduced to a very thin trail. He has from time to time angered a lot of liberals with his attacks on some of their sacred cows: in this article he may irritate businessmen. Besides The Conservative Mind, he has written five other books and numberless essays. He is thirty-seven, and has five university degrees, including one from St. Andrews in Scotland. At present, in Mecosta, Michigan, he is editing a new “little magazine,” Modern Age, due to appear this June.