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# Etceteras . . .

AMBROSE BIERCE, an American author popular in the late nineteenth century, is best remembered nowadays for his hilarious, biting cynicism in *Devil's Dictionary*, which contained such gems as: "POLITICS, A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles"; "LITIGATION, A machine which you go into as a pig and come out of as a sausage"; and "CABBAGE, A familiar kitchen vegetable about as large and wise as a man's head."

Bierce deserves credit for anticipating many modern ideas now embedded in public-choice theory and expressing them more colorfully than, say, the typical author in *Public Choice*. Here, for example, is his version of majority rule and rational ignorance:

Majorities, embracing as they do the most ignorant, seldom think rightly. Public opinion being the opinion of mediocrity is commonly a mistake and a mischief. The result is that public writer and public speaker alike find their account in confirming the masses in their brainless errors and brutish prejudices—in glutting their omnivorous vanity and in inflaming their implacable race and national hatreds.

Bierce never doubted that representative democracy is a sham. His view of the political process resembled that of Thomas Ferguson, whose *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems* is reviewed above by Michael Munger. In Bierce's words:

You can effect a change of robbers every four years. Inestimable privilege to pull off the glutted leech and attach the lean one! And you cannot even choose among the lean leeches, but must accept those designated by the programmers and showmen who have the reptiles on tap.

Small wonder that his *Dictionary* defined IDIOT as "a member of a large and powerful tribe whose influence in human affairs has always been dominant and controlling" and CAPITAL as "the seat of misgovernment."

Readers who would like to know more about the life and ideas of this fascinating, clear-eyed, and profoundly unhappy man can consult Roy Morris, Jr., *Ambrose Bierce: Alone in Bad Company* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), in which the quotations above appear on pp. 163, 182–83, 200–1.

ROBERT HIGGS