

Remarks on Arts and Utopias in the 1930s, A Propos of Some Exerpts from “Popeye’s Ark”

Alan Gowans

Volume 1, numéro 1, 1974

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077460ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077460ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Gowans, A. (1974). Remarks on Arts and Utopias in the 1930s, A Propos of Some Exerpts from “Popeye’s Ark”. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 1(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077460ar>

REMARKS ON ARTS AND UTOPIAS IN THE 1930s, A PROPOS OF SOME EXERPTS FROM "POPEYE'S ARK"

I

"BUT IS IT ART?"

Traditionally, great works of art in any media always appealed to audiences on several different levels. Multi-level appeal, indeed, was what distinguished High from Low arts. Low Arts like village miracle plays, block prints serving as souvenirs from some shrine, tavern songs, limners' likeness, addressed only one level of society and consciousness, performed only one function — telling a story, perhaps; decorating; amusing; declaring a conviction of some simple kind. High Arts — Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Constable's landscapes, Handel's *Messiah*, Michelangelo's *Sistine Ceiling*, the Parthenon and Chartres and Hagia Sophia — never did *less*. Always — and this is crucial to know and remember — they began with some such basic social function. What made them High Arts was that they went on to do much *more*. They performed multiple social functions. They appealed to different social classes, on diverse levels. For those perceptive enough, they provided deep allegories on the human condition, profound observations of truth.

Such arts are still with us. But not always, or necessarily, in the form of what we call our "modern" art. Consider, for example, the utopian fable presented here: "Popeye's Ark," from *Thimble Theatre, starring Popeye the Sailor*, which originally appeared as a syndicated feature in daily newspapers from April 1935 to March 1936. Though a comic strip, it has the distinguishing

subtleties and multi-level appeal of great historic works of art — serving the traditional social functions of illustration and persuasion/conviction, demonstrably readable on at least four levels — for amusement, for the allegory, for a moral, and as an art form.

(1) Originally, these strips were read primarily and mainly for amusement. Nothing necessarily demeaning about that — the great bulk of spectators in Elizabethan times went to see Shakespeare's plays for the same reason. Indeed, *Thimble Theatre* is in at least one way a direct descendant of those great classics. They sprang — as all living High Art must — from a matrix of Low Art drama, country historical pageants, miracle plays, and the like. From this matrix in due course descended the small-town theatrical melodramas of 19th Century America, satirized so amusingly by the "Duke" and the "Dauphin" in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. They in turn were direct ancestors of the early movies, as Nicolas Vardac, among others ably pointed out.* These early movies were satirized in an early comic strip (Comics and Movies, originating together as forms of "moving pictures" have always been interrelated); and as a satire of that, *Thimble Theatre* was first created! *Thimble Theatre* still can be read for amusement. Compared to many more pretentious arts of the 1930s, it wears remarkably well. But amusement was, like Shakespeare's appeal to the "groundlings" in the pit of the Globe Theatre, only the lowest layer of this art.

* *Stage to Screen*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953.

(2) *Thimble Theatre* can also be read as an allegory of the history of the 1930s and '40s. Obviously, that allegory is much plainer to us than it was to *Thimble Theatre's* original readers. They could hardly have been expected to realize with what astonishing prescience *Thimble Theatre* presented allegorical shapes of things to come, often a dozen or more years in the future. But there is nothing mysterious involved. Precisely in order to provide amusement for its mass audience, *Thimble Theatre's* stories had to be based upon certain principles of unchanging human nature (in distinction to the kind of convictions about the perfectibility of Man held by contemporary intellectuals and political leaders, on which contemporary Fine Arts and statesmanship were being based). Verisimilitude demanded that these principles produce certain results or endings to the fables presented in *Thimble Theatre*. Results of acting on these same principles in the "real" world would not be different. Given human failings and foibles, similar actions will have similar outcomes, whether on Main Street, Downing Street, Wilhelmstrasse, Red Square, or the Sea Hag's Ship. If *Thimble Theatre* seems to predict the course of national and international events during the 1930s and '40s so remarkably, that is simply because its world was in a curious way more real than the world of illusion and hopes on which politicians and intellectuals of that period all too often based their calculations. Whence the third element in *Thimble Theatre*:

(3) *Thimble Theatre* was traditional art in that it had a moral. It was meant to instruct while pleasing. You were supposed to learn something from it. What you learned was the Way Things Are. Earlier generations learned How Things Were from morality plays, from Shakespearian drama, from epics and ballads; our age had to learn how things were from its comic strips.

(4) *Thimble Theatre* can be studied as an art form. Not, of course, a form approved by the modern avant-garde Establishment. Rather, it is a classic example of one of the oldest kinds of art there is — the traditional art of illustrating, of recording and clarifying events by means of images. Arts with this kind of social function go back at least as far as ancient Sumeria, and include Shakespeare's plays, Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, and Mozart's *Figaro*. *Thimble Theatre* is not of course in that class of High Art. But it is about all our age has to offer in the category, since what we call Art has abandoned this and other traditional functions, to do something quite different in and for society.

Almost everyone has heard of Popeye the Sailor. People who were children in the 1950s and early

1960s will have grown up watching him on television popping open cans of spinach and going forth to pulverize the villain Bluto. A pity; for this was jejeune stuff compared to the original, whence the TV animation derived — the comic-strip *Thimble Theatre*, created by Elie Crisler Segar (1894–1938). In the few years just preceding his death from cancer at age 44, Segar had brought the comic narrative to rare perfection. He had made it a subtle vehicle for conveying the central truths and satirizing the controlling myths of American life in his time. In consequence, his strip can be ranked as one of the classic creations of American art. It is a great literary allegory in illustrative form, and a historical document of first-rate importance for anyone wanting to know what the great silent majority of Americans were thinking in those times of the Great Depression, when Nazis and Soviets were building up their totalitarian power-machines and the sad sequence of events was underway that would lead to the genocide of Katyn Forest, the atrocities of Rotterdam, Pearl Harbour, and Dresden.

Of course we know what intellectuals were thinking about all these things. Their opinions were being trumpeted through literary journals, art magazines, editorial pages, books, and speeches. All are easily available in libraries. Many are still prescribed in schools. But to find out what the great masses of people were thinking — which was by no means identical with the intellectuals' opinions — is not so simple. For that, the best source is in so-called popular arts — movies (in distinction to cinema), cartoons, comics. By definition, these arts of mass communication speak to and for the great masses. If ever and whenever they cannot or will not communicate, they vanish, replaced by other arts that can and will. It follows that sooner or later all popular arts, even the most successful, must disappear, unless they are preserved as significant historical documents. Hence the present project.

There are many excellent studies of the popular arts in overview — general surveys which illustrate the history of comics, for example, by showing one or two examples of a great many different ones. But only a very few comics have been reprinted in such a way as to present them in the way they were seen by readers originally. † And none, I believe, have been presented with a commentary emphasizing their importance as modern representatives of historic arts, carrying on traditional social functions, and hence with comparable value as research documents for serious historical study.

† The Nostalgia Press Series begun in 1970 is an exception, and anticipates a better situation to come.

Some people still bridle at the notion of comics being taken “seriously” in any respect — least of all as “art.” Thirty years ago an obituary for George Herriman, creator of *Krazy Kat* (in *Time*, 8 May 1944), noted approvingly that “Herriman always felt very humble towards serious artists” — implying, presumably, that Herriman’s meticulously structured allegories in word and picture were less “serious” than experiments in pure form, or emotion-splattered canvases conceived in a moment and executed in minutes. The question most frequently asked at the end of any lecture on comics still is “But is it Art?” It is time such nonsense ended. The answer to that question is No. It is *not* Art as defined by the avant-garde Establishment that came to power in the 1950s and 60s. But it *is* the same kind of activity, proceeding from the same social necessity, that produced what we call the historic arts of the human race for the past 6000 years.

Nowadays, “artists” are defined as people who express themselves, people who, in paint or words or music or however express feelings about themselves, about art itself, about the times, about the world, about anything. “Art” is therefore whatever is used for that purpose — whether made, or found. It is a doctrine first proclaimed in Courbet’s *Studio* of 1855, thence spread throughout the world — Art is what the Artist says is Art. On that premise, there is only one way to go... Realism begets Impressionism begets Post-Impressionism begets Expressionism begets Cubism begets Abstract Expressionism begets Conceptualism, Earthworks, etc. As it was in the beginning, is now — *Bonjour Monsieur Courbet* and nails driven into walls, *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* and furrows plowed across deserts, *Portrait of Vincent sans oreille* and cliffs wrapped in polyethelene, *Guernica*, *Composition # 1*, five cans of oil dropped into the Gulf Stream, all are Art if that is what an Artist calls them.

And ever shall be: for the power of this avant-garde Establishment lies in its impenetrability. You cannot get into or out of the system except by fiat. “Art is what the Artist says it is. What then is an Artist? An Artist is someone who creates Art.” You see? In no way can such a system be subject to rational criticism. To belong to this Establishment takes an act of faith; defying it is like blasphemy or sedition. Which is not as far-fetched as it sounds, for the truly astonishing thing about this Establishment is its appeal, equally to Right and Left. Ever since some cultural official discovered, along about 1955, that Soviet policy encourages “social realism” and Lenin had called abstract art an “infantile disorder of Leftism”, abstract art has been assumed to have something mysteriously

American about it, and conservative Congressmen have had far fewer doubts about the wisdom of spending large sums for Art and Artists than on, say, expanded welfare programs. At the same time, the counter-culture has enthusiastically acclaimed Artists from Courbet to Conceptualists as heroes and models of liberation from bourgeois values, if not entirely from bourgeois money. All of which is of concern here only because it means that the avant-garde Establishment so blankets all critical thought, both Left and Right, as to disguise how recent a thing its concept of Art is. We forget that “art” up to very recent times — did not primarily mean self-expression, and never ever meant self-expression exclusively. Up to about 1800 there was in fact no such thing as “art” at all. There were only various “arts” such as painting, sculpture, architecture, jewelry, etc. And about them, you never asked unanswerable question like “What is Art?” You asked, what is it that these activities called “arts” — picture-making, carving, building, etc. — did in and for society? And then you got an answer. “Arts” were skills. “Arts” provided substitute images to preserve the physical appearance of persons or things. “Arts” illustrated. “Arts” beautified, ornamenting or designing objects so as to identify their use and relate them to human experience. “Arts” were means of convincing and persuading, by making tangible symbols and visual metaphors of ideas and beliefs which a given society collectively held, or it was felt ought to hold. In fulfilling functions like these, some degree of personal expression or expression of the nature of media and materials, might enter in; this was one of the qualities which traditionally distinguished High Arts from Low Arts.* But the idea of an activity concerned with these functions only indirectly when at all — of art being primarily or exclusively self-expression — is for all intents and purposes a modern one, beginning to spread hardly more than two hundred years ago, and achieving wide acceptance only in our own time. When the avant-garde Establishment talks about theirs being *the* art of the 20th century, they are right in this sense at least.

“Art” in the avant-garde Establishment sense has nothing to do with what used to be considered the social functions defining the activity now called arts. It dismisses substitute imagery and indeed all concern for an objectively perceived world. It abhors illustration. Since Courbet, it specifically abjures concern for beautification in favor of what we can best call a quasi-scientific search for the Reality of things, conducted by an intuition

* For a systematic development of this idea, see my *Unchanging Arts*, Philadelphia/New York, 1970.

beyond the bounds of rational analysis. And its communication is of a radically different sort — the artist's convictions expressed in so allusive, incidental, accidental and solipsistic a way as to be entirely private and personal. Its consummation comes in "art-as-art". In Renaissance times, artists climbed in social status because of their "philosophy" — i.e., science; they were the only ones who could design machines, cast cannon, and so forth, and who could communicate society's central ideas effectively; hence they could promote themselves as invaluable and indispensable to society. "Art-as-art" is the precise opposite, a "creation that revolutionizes creation and judges itself by its destruction. Artists-as-artists value themselves for what they have gotten rid of and for what they refuse to do." †

But the refusal of avant-garde Establishment art to perform the traditional functions of what was called art in the past, does not mean that those functions are obsolete. Not at all. Arts with those functions never were dispensable frills. Their practitioners never had to write treatises explaining their importance; it was always obvious. Above all particular functions, the activity traditionally called arts had the primordial use of helping individuals to find themselves, know who they were. From time immemorial, substitute imagery helped humans realize their world; it helps children do so still. Mimetic substitute imagery in architecture and decoration perpetuated older values and provided stability through times of change. Illustration made things clear (as the word implies; its root is "lux" = light). Beautification brought order, hence meaning and pleasure, out of existential experience. Persuasion/conviction established values. No society can survive without some means of doing such things. Anytime and anywhere whatever is officially called "art" cannot or will not satisfy the need for them, other agents must and will be found. So with us. The historic functions of substitute imagery, illustration, beautification, conviction are still being carried out in our society — but not by what our avant-garde Establishment calls its Arts of painting, sculpture, or architecture. The arts that perform them now go under new names. We call them the "popular arts", arts of mass communication.

Popular artists play the role in our society which has always traditionally been played by "artists" in all societies throughout history. It is they, not avant-garde Establishment personalities, who do for our society what was done for earlier societies by Raphael and Michelangelo, Reynolds and

Gainsborough, by the builders of pyramids and cathedrals, the carvers of Greek statues and the painters of Sung scrolls. Because these "popular artists" serve social needs, it is in their work that the historical record of the 20th century can be found, rather than in the personal and private expressions of the avant-garde Establishment. Not that there is no self-expression in the popular arts — far from it. But there self-expression is always contained, as it always traditionally was contained, within the context of a given, assigned, social function. Of all which, Segar's *Thimble Theatre* is a classic example.

II

THIMBLE THEATRE: MODERN REPRESENTATIVE OF THE HISTORIC ARTS OF ALLEGORICAL ILLUSTRATION

Elie Crislar Segar got off to a slow start in his chosen profession. He taught himself cartooning through a correspondence course, made the acquaintance of pioneer comic-strip artist R.F. Outcault, and through him got a job in 1915 with the *Chicago Herald* drawing *Charlie Chaplin's Comic Capers*. In 1917 he moved to the *Chicago Evening American* to do a strip called *Looping the Loop* and in 1919 he began *Thimble Theatre* for King Features in New York. All three were feeble, *Thimble Theatre* was perhaps feeblest of the lot, for it was a spoof on a satire which was not very funny to begin with — Ed Whelan's *Minute Movies* taking off popular movie successes of the moment. Not much of a vehicle for creating significant art by avant-garde Establishment standards. But then this was how all the great art of history had been created. Never in the history of the world did great art result from somebody sitting down and saying, "Now I shall create my masterpiece." At least, not until modern times — and some of these "masterpieces" have sunk into limbo already. Traditionally, the artist took what was offered him. Raphael had to paint madonnas for churches and propaganda for Popes; he made masterpieces of this — to him, certainly — dull material. Euphronios had to make pots for the Athenian export trade; he made masterpieces of them. Michelangelo and Sinan worked for powerful rulers and made symbols of their greatness. Reynolds had to paint portraits of the reigning aristocracy who had taken over the pretensions of divine-right monarchy in 18th-century England; he made masterpieces of them. And so on. Segar made a masterpiece of what was in the beginning similarly hack work.

Early comics were predominantly of the "gag-a-day" type, whence their common name "the daily

† Ad Reinhardt. "Writings", in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *The New Art*, 1966.

funnies.” Each episode was supposed to be self-contained, with its own joke — a format that Segar was not comfortable with. He invented for *Thimble Theatre* a set of characters with outlandish names — Ham Gravy, the Oyl family of Castor, Nana, Cole, and Olive — who carried on exchanges of feeble wit terminating with one or the other falling backward in astonishment or chagrin “plop!” out of the final box. Only with the development of narrative sequences did Segar’s talent begin to show. Now each day had its joke, but there was a continuity of theme from one panel to the next. Segar began narratives in the late 1920s; his “break-through” (to borrow an Arty term) came when Popeye the Sailor appeared in October 1929, followed by J. Wellington Wimpy in 1931.

These two contrasting characters provided him with a Body-Soul allegorical vehicle familiar from many other literatures — the Quixote-Panza Pickwick-Weller Hardy-Laurel contrast of noble idealism with crafty self-indulgence, lean with fat, bravery with cowardice. With such a vehicle everyone can identify, for we all contain elements of both. Segar used it first to enrich his spoofs on melodrama, then began developing longer and longer sequences involving social comment and allegory on the human condition. Quick and huge national success followed. Already by 1933 the *Chicago American* was commissioning a special *Thimble Theatre* series on the World’s Fair which is a noteworthy document of the times. But it was in the next few years that *Thimble Theatre* touched its great peak of popularity and historical significance.

In many respects Segar’s attitudes and outlook were strikingly like Mark Twain’s. Both consciously and systematically tried to ascertain what would appeal to their public. Both in consequence manifest a peculiarly American kind of egalitarianism, mocking pomposity, humbug, and cant. But *Thimble Theatre* was much more of a mass art; for that reason, while it cannot rank with Twain’s novels as High Art (though I think time will show it is not as far out of the running as currently supposed), it has wide and deep historical significance as a document of popular thought that alone justifies republishing these central narratives, as we do here.

III

THIMBLE THEATRE AS ALLEGORY ON ORIGINAL SIN

The narrative sequence reprinted here shows *Thimble Theatre* at the height of its popularity and Segar at the height of his creative powers.

“Popeye’s Ark”, ran from 22 April 1935 to 19 April 1936 — a whole year. Both are variants of a classic theme in American literature, to which several scholarly studies have been devoted — the “American Adam” vision of an ideal New World society, free of Old World corruptions: Eden exempt forever from Original Sin. R. W. B. Lewis’s *The American Adam* and Donald Noble’s *The Garden of America*, among others, trace the “American Adam” theme through American literature — Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Emerson, James taking up the idea, exploring it, finding it wanting, ending disillusioned. Alfred Frankenstein has shown how the “American Adam in Eden” is also the theme of the most typically American paintings of the 19th century, by George Caleb Bingham and William Sidney Mount. Obviously this was a theme with mass appeal a century ago, and indeed down into the early 20th century. Thereafter, according to conventional cultural history, it disappeared from American arts. And, as far as the avant-garde Establishment goes, that is certainly true; the theme of its literature is literature and subjective emotions evoked thereby, the theme of its painting is artistic self-expression. But the old theme in fact lives on, strongly. It simply migrated to other media, comics like *Thimble Theatre* being a notable example. Here, in words and picture combined, we find it pervasive as ever, and in all essential ways treated quite as profoundly.

As in 19th century literature, *Thimble Theatre*’s allegory is always more general than specific. Though Segar lived in an age of utopias abounding, nothing in *Thimble Theatre* can be construed as a specific reference to any of them. No hint of Huey Long’s Every-Man-A-King Club, nor of Dr. Francis E. Townsend’s Old Age Revolving Pension Plan, nor of Upton Sinclair’s End Poverty In California — though all flourished at the very time, and two of them in the same place, that Segar was working.

In this respect, *Thimble Theatre* contrasts markedly with comics like *Pogo* in the 1950s or *The Wizard of Id* from the mid-1960s, in which one whole level of the allegory consistently refers to specific contemporary events. One reason for the difference, certainly, is that *Thimble Theatre* in the 1930s was much more thoroughly a mass art than these later comics. In any era, the broadest mass art form will be the one easiest of access. From about 1955 TV and animated cartoons, which are accessible to anyone able to turn a button, became *the* mass arts in place of comics, which require at least the minimal effort of opening a newspaper and reading balloons, and movies, which require going out to buy a ticket — just as, on the same principle, comics and movies had begun displacing popular

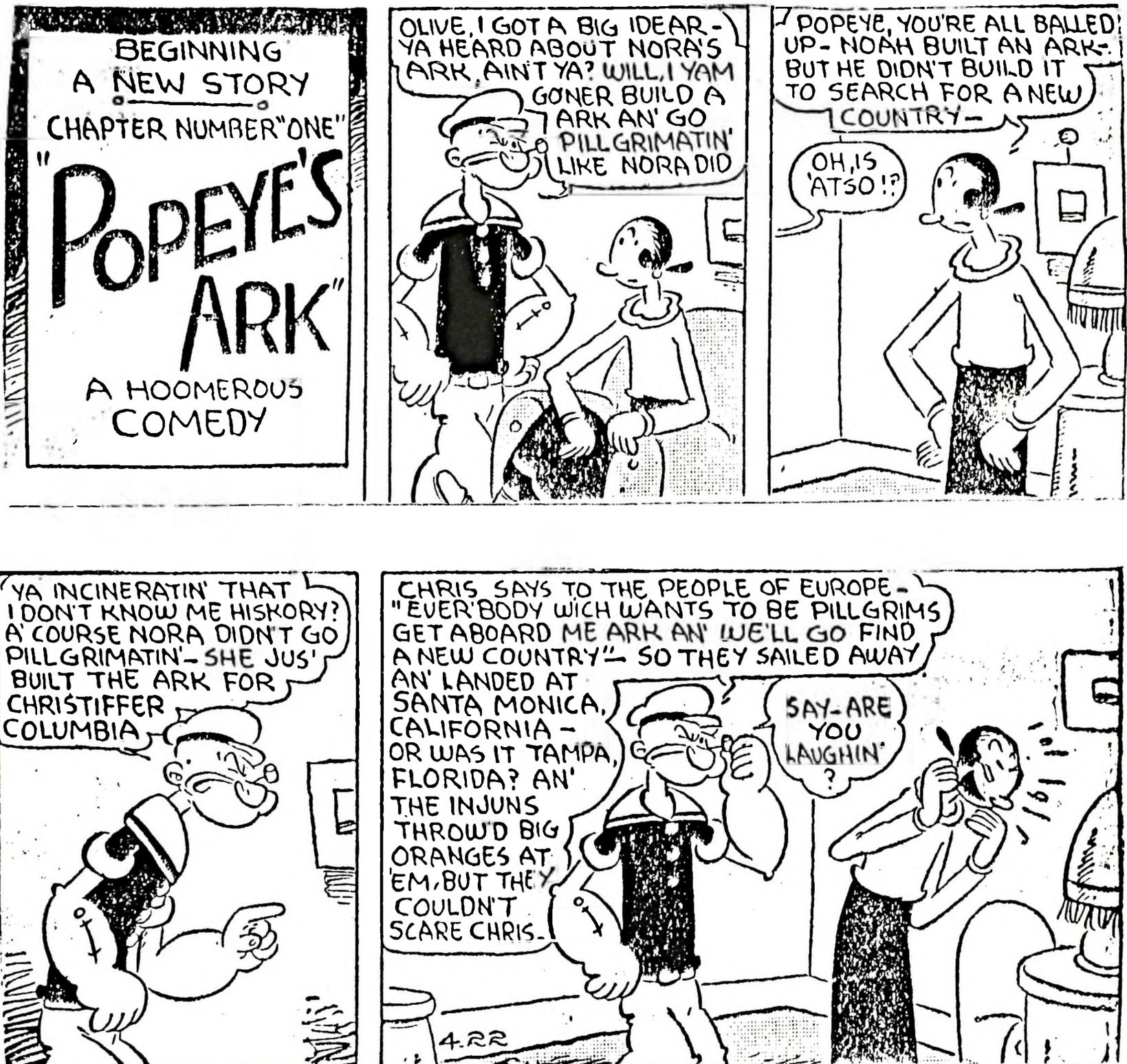
novels and stock melodrama as *the* mass arts from the 1890s onwards, they in turn lithographs, and so on back. And any truly mass art has to couch an allegory in general terms — the less specific, the less chance of needless offense and misinterpretation. Which is by no means a disadvantage, or enforced shallowness — all writers who hope for broad appeal must take some similar approach.

How little was in fact lost will I hope be apparent even in the brief excerpts* from this classic utopian melodrama which follow.

Alan GOWANS
University of Victoria
Victoria

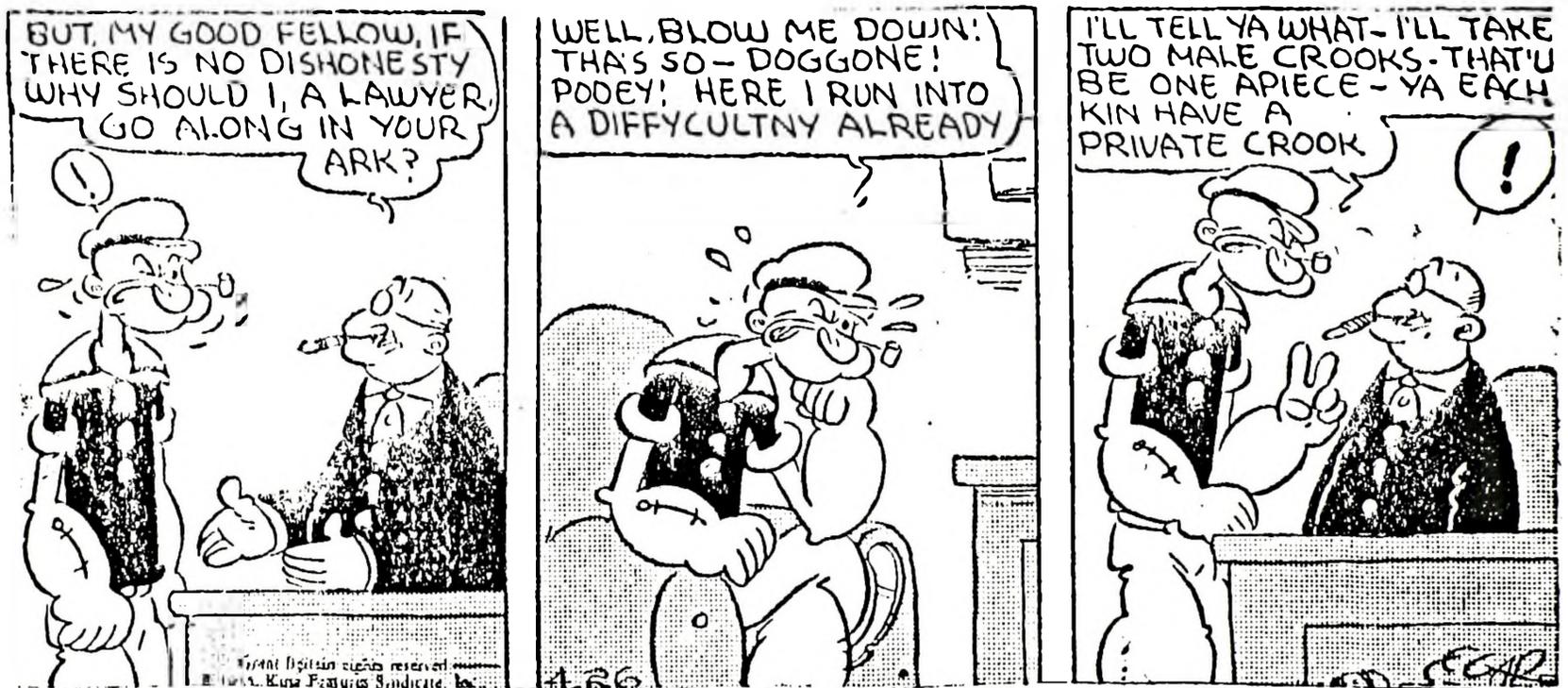
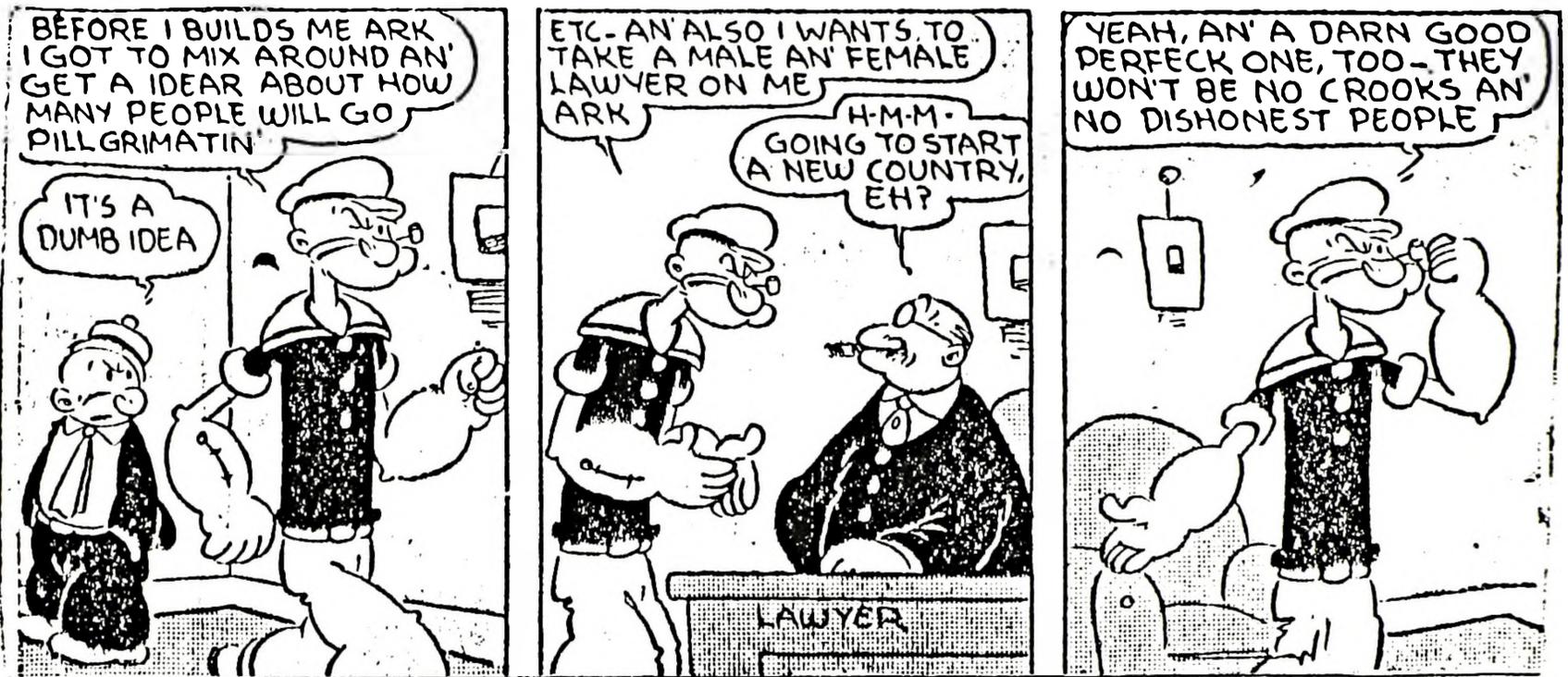
* Used by permission of King Features Syndicate, New York.

IV
SOME REPRESENTATIVE EPISODES
FROM "POPEYE'S ARK"



22 April 1935. — Fittingly, this allegory on government from the Age of the Common Man begins with the notion that the Common Man can govern. Any Common Man, no matter how ignorant, how young, how provincial, is capable of governing. Governance requires no special skills, talent, background, or knowledge... And so far from requiring any knowledge of history, it is perhaps best to have none — for in that way, one can spin visions and generate enthusiasms free of embarrassing realities. There is no task so fruitless as the one Olive Oyl here undertakes — to confront the enthusiast with facts, the gambler with statistics, the inventor with principles of physics...

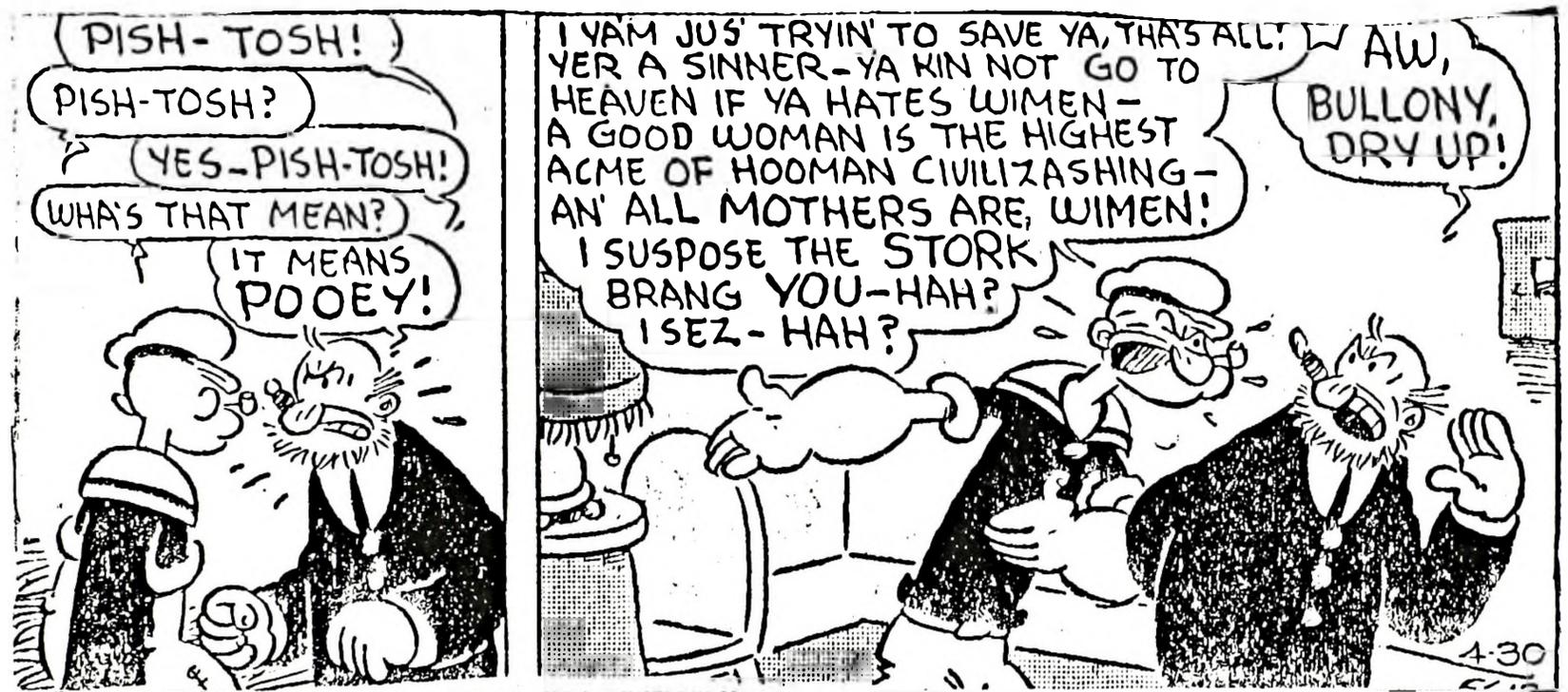
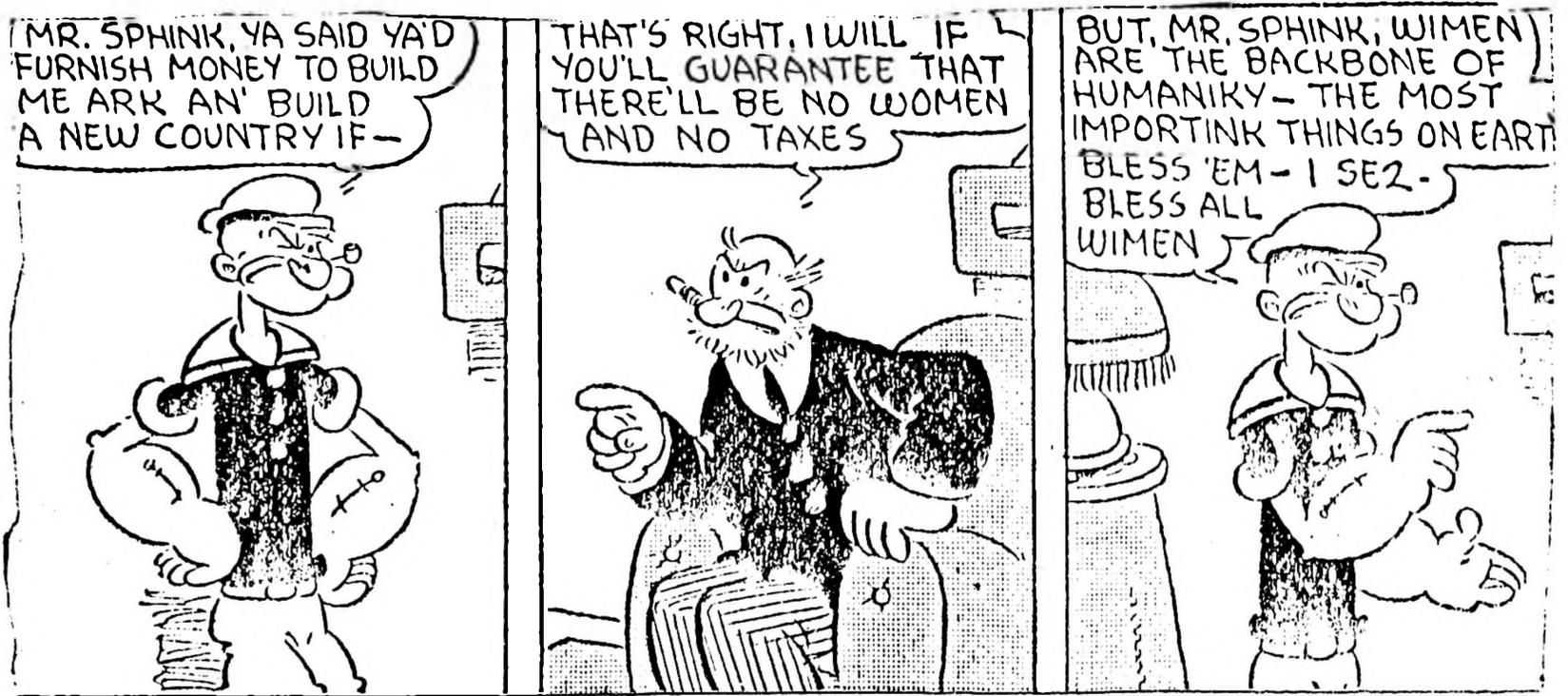
Not, to be sure, something unique to the 20th century. In Western history, demagogues sprung from lowly origins and claiming to represent “the people” began appearing as early as the 14th century — Cola da Rienzo, whom Luigi Barzini describes in *The Italians* as a precursor of Mussolini, is an example. But it took the doctrine that mankind is by nature good and perfect to bring this kind of demagoguery to full flower — for if it is only corrupt institutions that prevent us from developing into perfection, anyone who can claim to overcome institutions in his/her time can claim the right to govern.



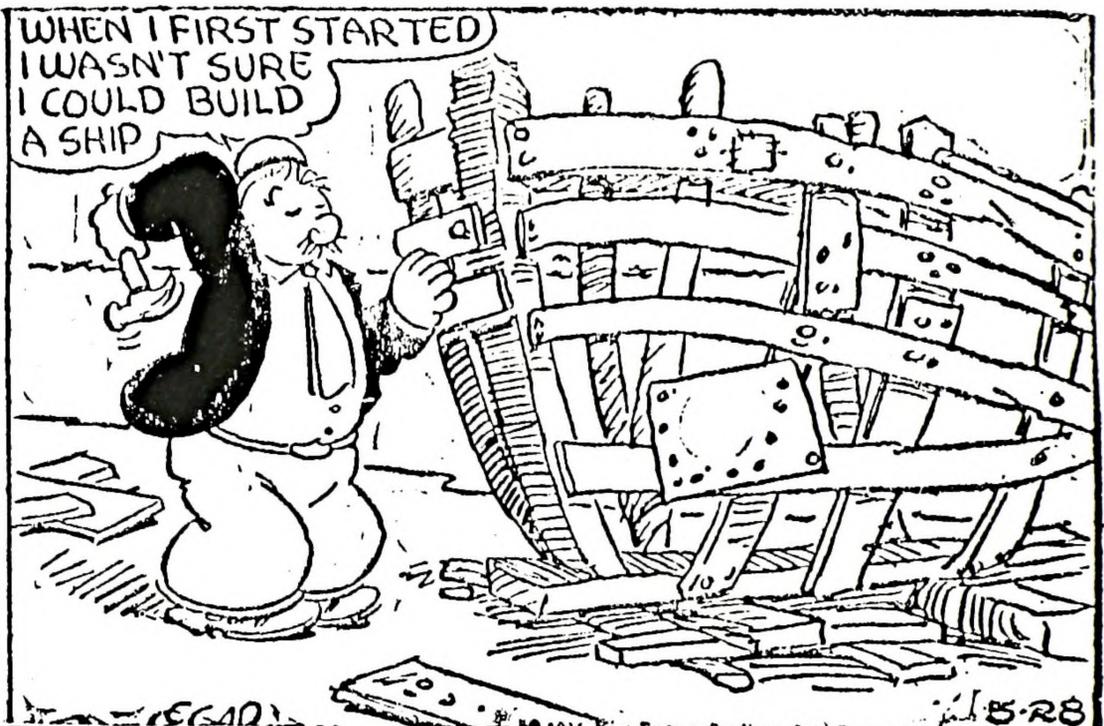
26 April 1935. — Problems, problems already, and the venture has hardly started! Popeye finds himself here in the same kind of quandry that confronted Frank Lloyd Wright in planning his “Broadacre City” during these very same years, as a perfect society which would realize Jefferson’s dream of an American Arcadia:

“In the course of the dialogue with which *Architecture & Modern Life* concludes, Wright is brought around to saying, ‘I don’t think Broadacre City would be fit for humans that have been more or less degraded by the circumstances in which they now live. Something would have to be done for them while they last. Some preparation for their end.’ But since all of us, including Wright himself, have been so degraded by the world, it follows that there are no candidates for admission. Because of our corruption, we cannot build Broadacres with our own hands, any more than can the sinner, according to Christian and especially Protestant belief, save himself by his own efforts. Broadacres is whole and complete — ‘everywhere or nowhere’ as Wright repeatedly insisted. It is without past or future. It lies outside history altogether, and no descendant of Adam, thrust into depravity simply by being born into the world of history, is worthy of entering. In the very last analysis Wright was compelled to recognize the reality of that aspect of the human condition that Calvin called original sin.” [Norris K. SMITH, *Frank Lloyd Wright, a Study in Architectural Content*, N.Y. 1966, pp. 175–6]

* The Broadacre City scheme was first sketched out in *The Disappearing City* (1932), concisely set forth in an article in the *Architectural Record* for 1935, and summarized in *Architecture & Modern Life* (1938). *The Living City* (1958) shows how it survived in Wright’s thinking into the end of his life, without much awareness of anything fundamentally wrong.

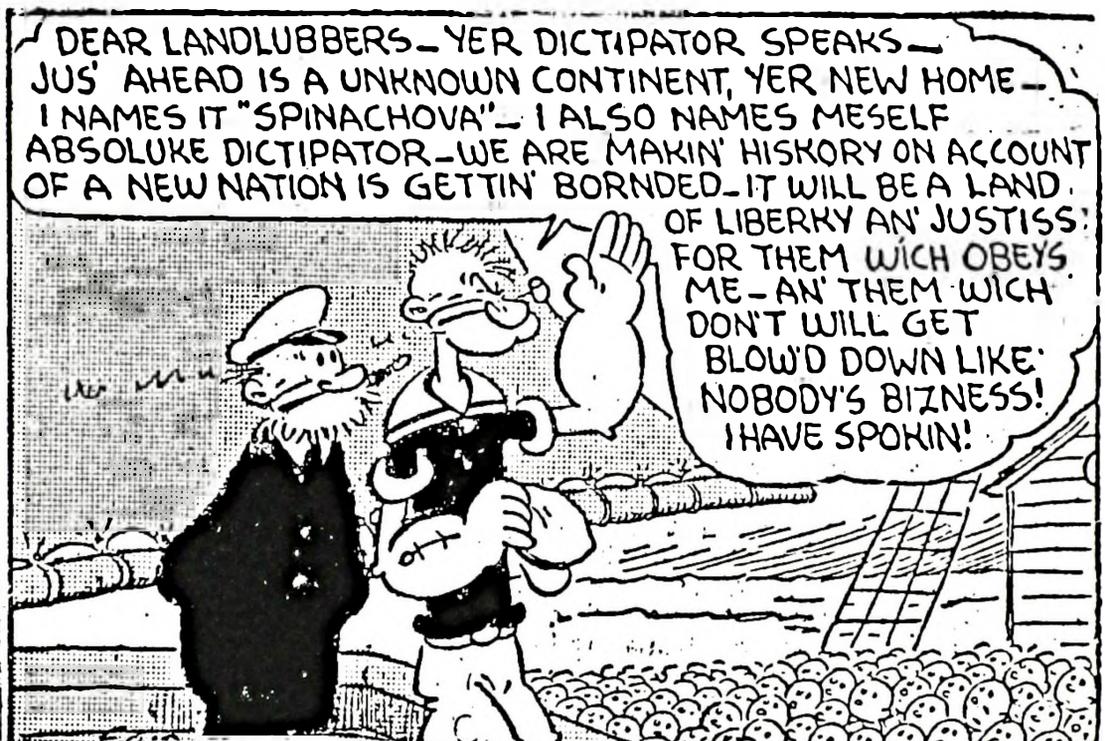


30 April 1935. — People may seek power for the highest of motives — to end the sufferings and problems of humanity, to bring about new deals, fair deals, new freedoms, new frontiers, great societies, workers' paradises. But before they can get to a position where they can do all these beneficent things, they have to win the support of others. And that means making some sort of accommodation with prejudices, foibles, ambitions, fears — which in the end dooms their enthusiasms to futility.



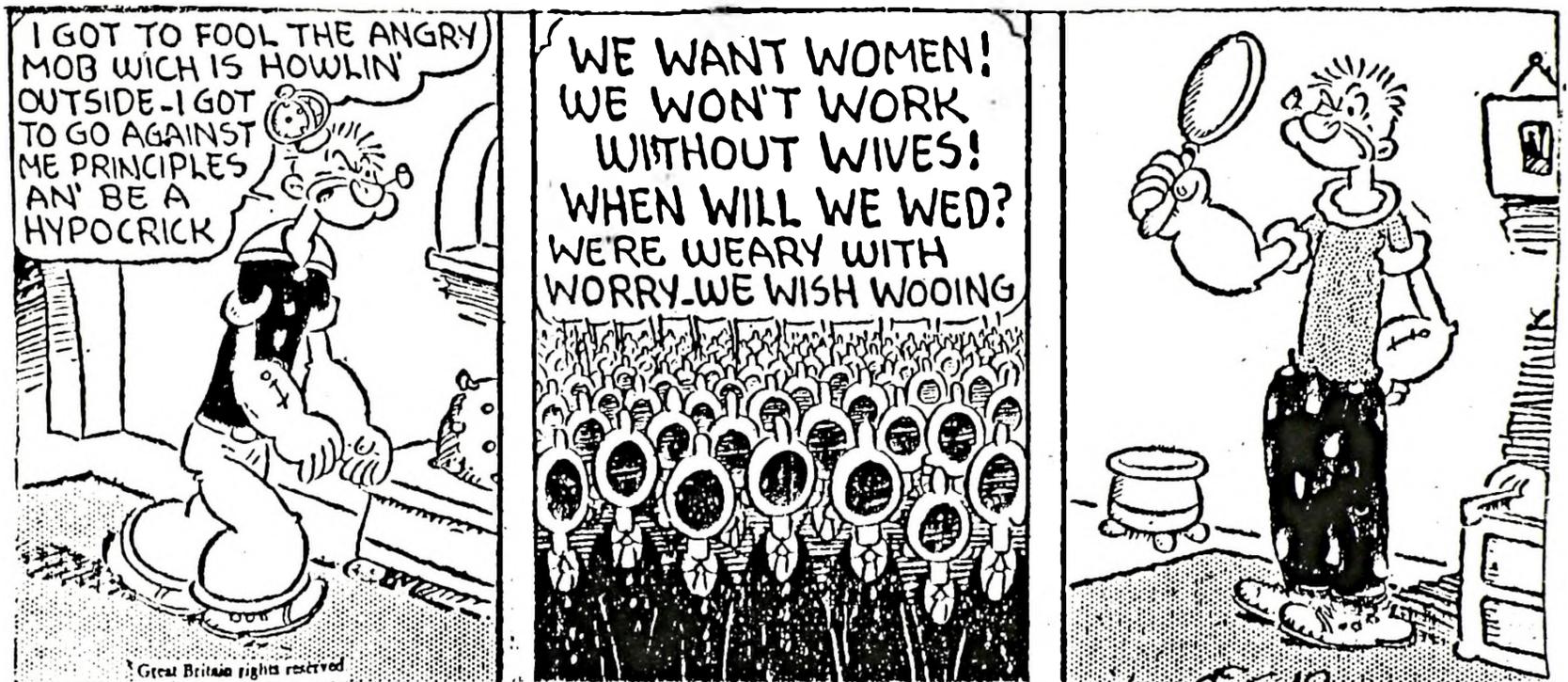
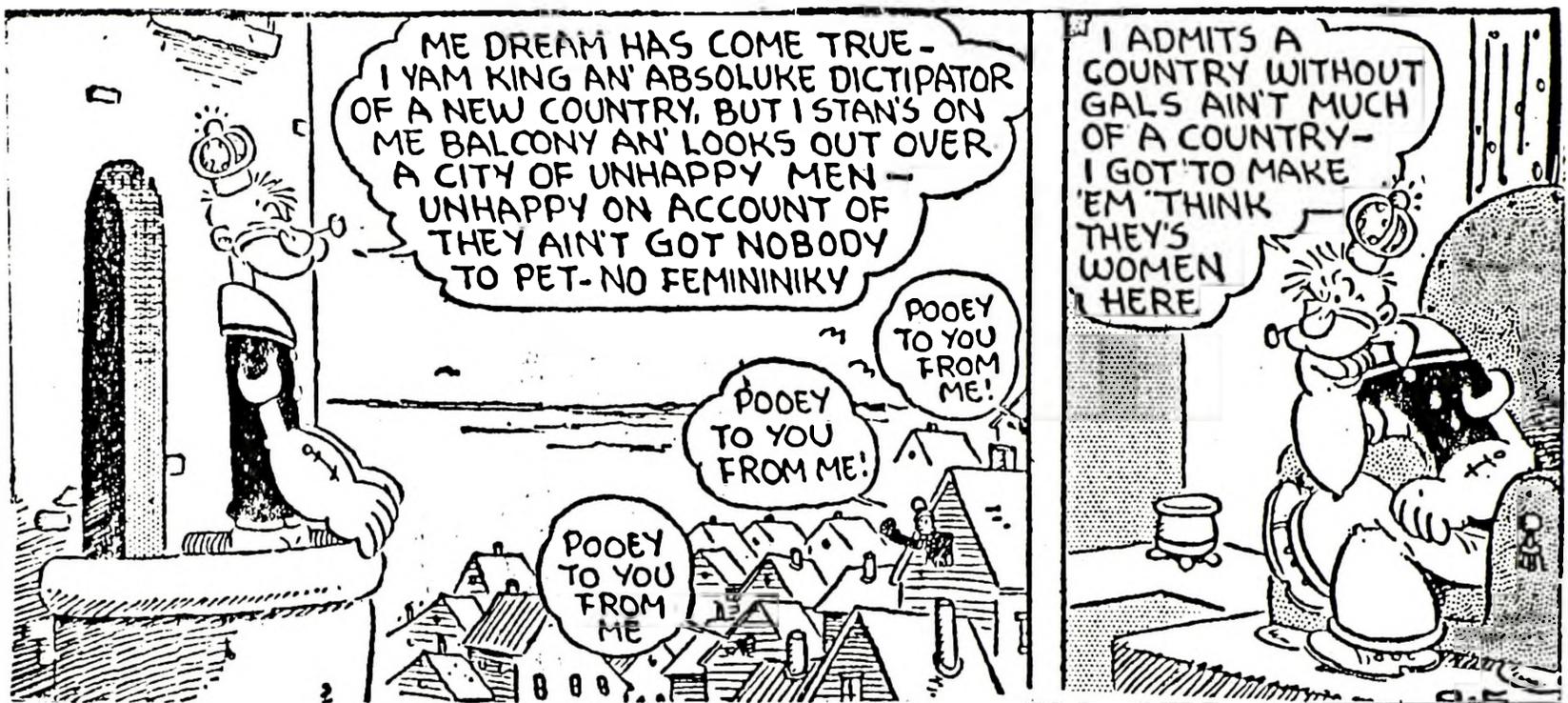
25-28 May 1935. — Nor is there any way to exclude certain perennial human types from society. Plato banned the intellectuals of his day — the “poets” from his ideal republic, because he thought them idlers who deceived people and were worse than useless to the commonwealth. But in the end it was the intellectuals who interpreted Plato’s ideas, often distorting them and producing weird copies of them.

(In the *Thimble Theatre* cast of allegorical characters, Wimpy functions as the representative intellectual. “The trouble with Wimpy is,” Popeye once explained to Olive, “he went to collich onc’t, an’ never got over it.” He lives by his wits; had he been fortunate enough to live generation or two later, he would no doubt have been able to live on grants.)

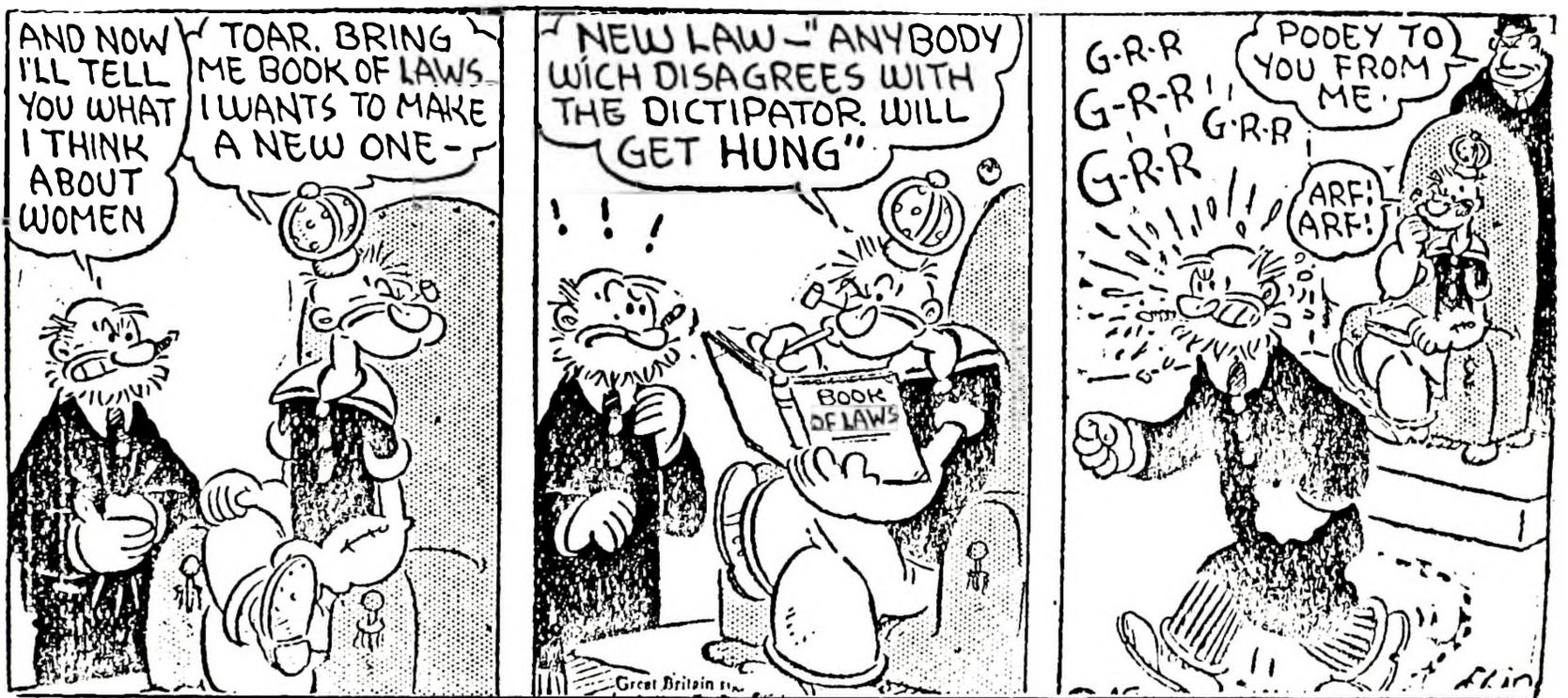


11 July 1935. — Like John Winthrop aboard the *Arabella*, Popeye makes a speech as his ship approaches his New World. But it sounds more like Samuel Johnson, lecturing the rebellious colonists in *Taxation No Tyranny* (1766)

“All government is ultimately and essentially absolute... In sovereignty there are no gradations. There may be limited royalty, there may be limited consulship; but there can be no limited government. There must in every society be some power or other from which there is no appeal.”



5 August 1935. — He stands on his balcony overlooking his capital city, like Mussolini. He hears the crowd roar, like Hitler: the chant, with its alliterative W's, recalls the "Wobblies" of a couple of decades before, as well as the German chant of the 1920s, demanding re-armament, *Wir wollen wieder Waffen* (= *we want arms again*). And as inevitably happens, the ruler becomes a prison of his own power. Like Lenin, like Stalin, he has lost his freedom of action, and must do what his position requires — whence come mighty absurdities.



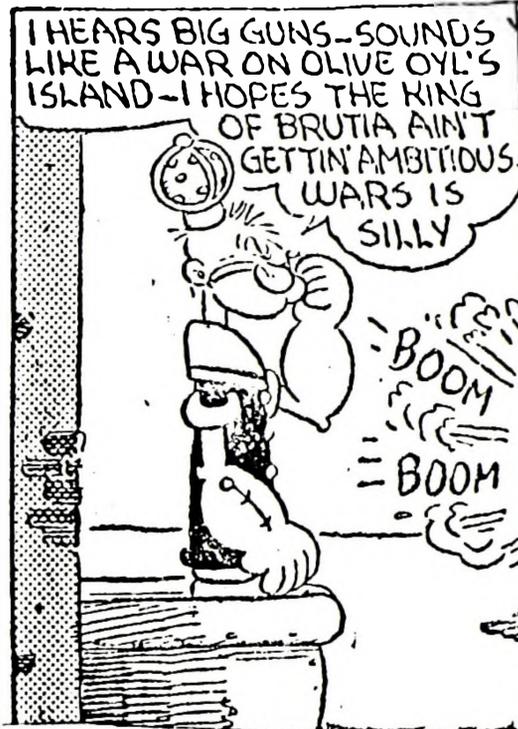
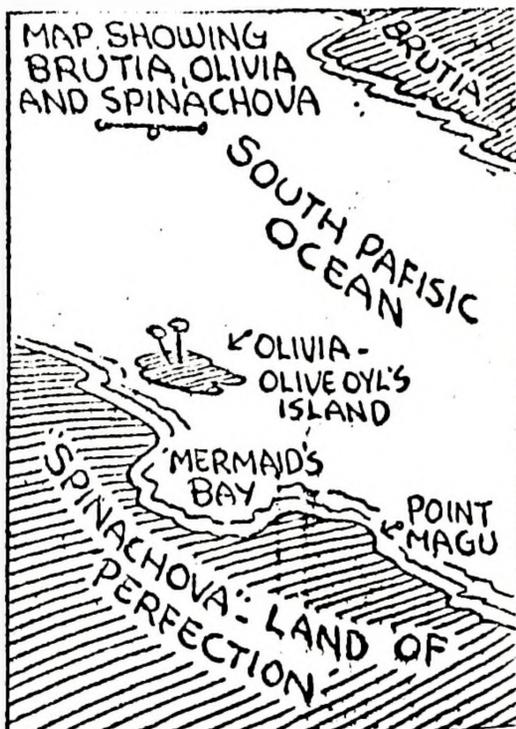
15 September 1935. — “The common notion is that the doctrine of Divine Right, as held by the extremists of the 17th century, was the last kick of medievalism. That is the opposite of the truth; it was the first effort of the modern spirit. In the Middle Ages allegiance was conditional, as it was in Fiji, ancient Ceylon, Jukunland, and other homes of divine kingship. A king is not necessarily absolute, nor his authority unconditional, because he is divine. Unconditional allegiance grew on the ruins of the medieval nobility. The struggle round this new growth was to decide not whether it should be fostered or destroyed, but who should gain possession of it, the king and his court party, or the parliament. In England Parliament won, and it now claims obedience as unconditional as ever was claimed by the most fanatical devotees of Divine Right... It is only the formula that shocks us in the claims put forward on behalf of the Stuart kings; we have accepted the substance; and that is where parliament proved cleverer than the court; it wrapped up absolutism in more acceptable words.” (A. M. HOCART, “The Law,” *Kings & Councillors*, 1936, p. 151.)

Since the 17th century, the object of politics has been to seize power in parliament so as to write law's favorable to one's own interests — which laws then become as absolute as any dictator's or divine-right monarch. (The last scene of *Alice in Wonderland* also satirizes this lawmaking — as distinct from law-administering — power).

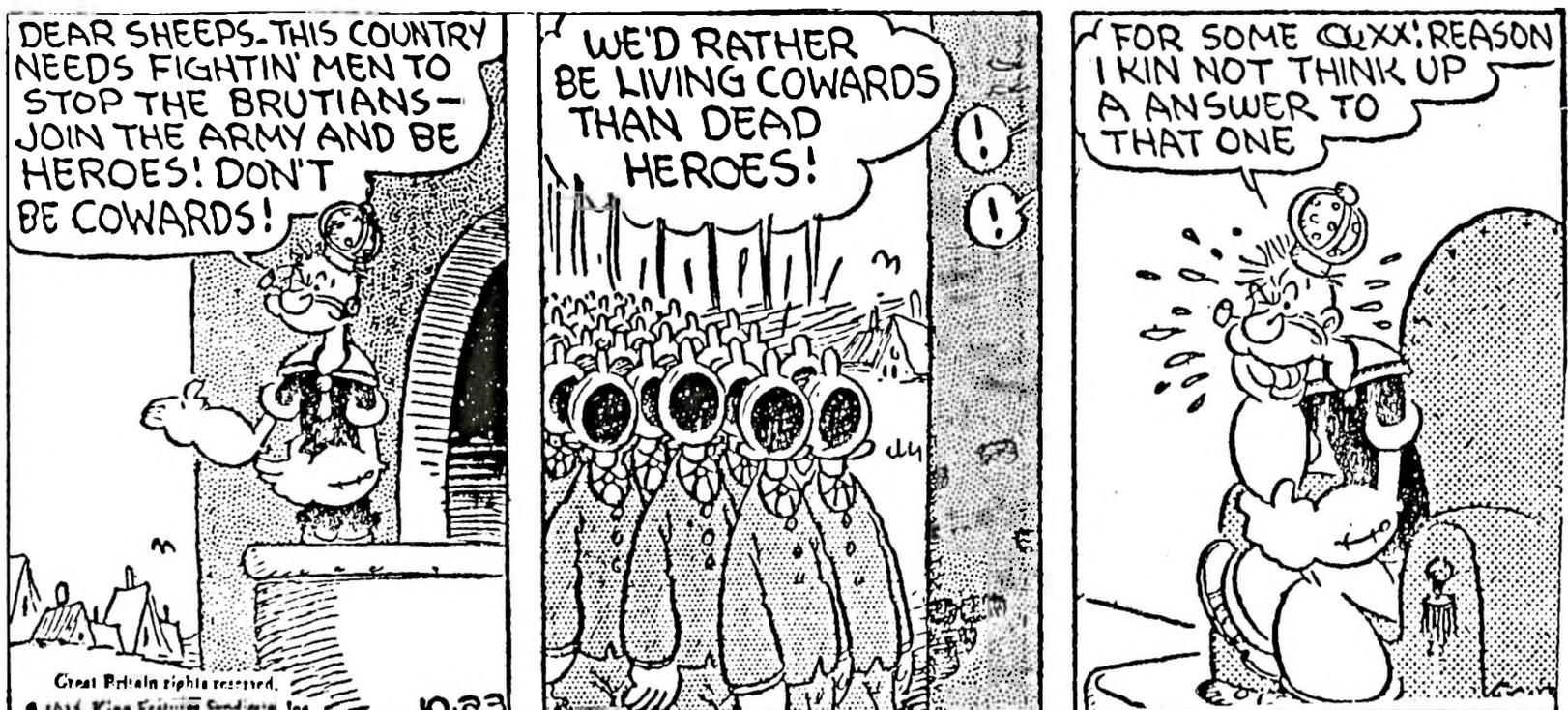
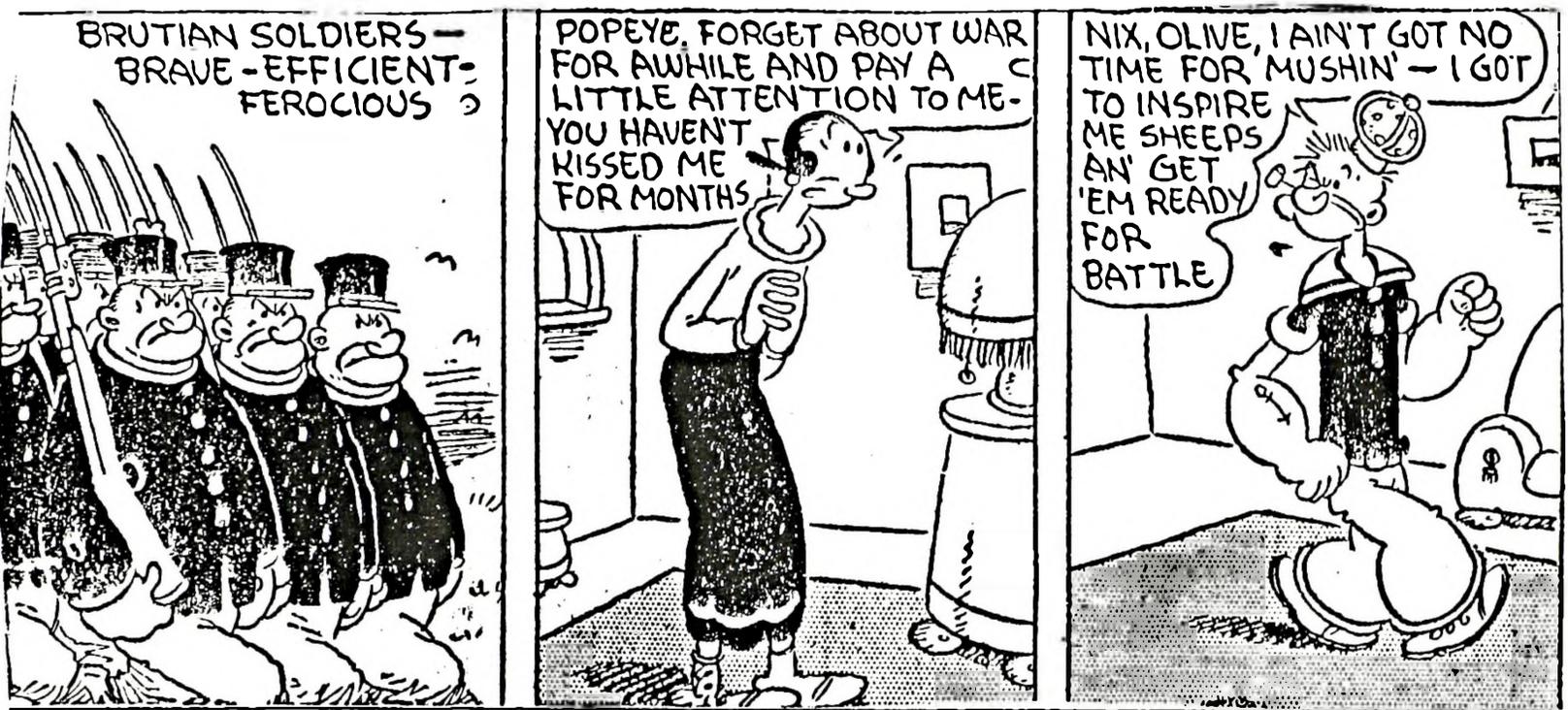
The book of laws is brought to Popeye by Toar, who here as in the preceding sequence represents the force which must underlie all authority, parliamentary or dictatorial.

BEGINNING A NEW CHAPTER ENTITLED—
 "YOU CAN'T EXPECT APRIL SHOWERS FROM
 WAR CLOUDS"
 THE "BRUTIANS" ARE COMING!—"BRUTIA" IS A LAND OF BRUTES SITUATED NORTHWEST OF POPEYE'S NEW COUNTRY—POPEYE'S PEOPLE ARE NOT PREPARED FOR WAR SO THE RESULT MAY BE DISASTROUS

Great Britain rights reserved.
 © 1935 King Features Syndicate, Inc.

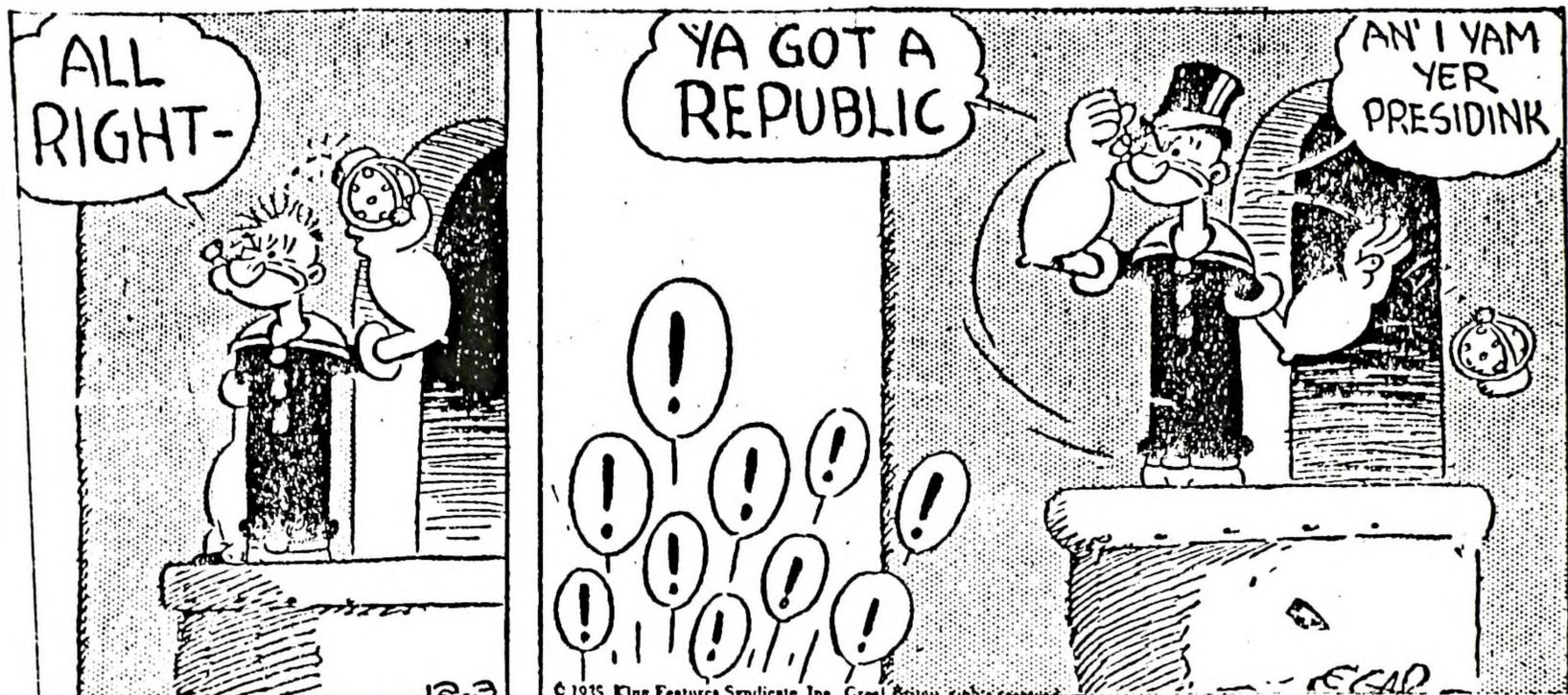


21 October 1935. — The second half of "Popeye's Ark" deals with the Brutian War, and it is a reservoir of cliches from the 1930s "peace-loving people," "war is silly," and such. The chief object of the satire is pacifism, a theme evidently popular with *Thimble Theatre's* readers, for Segar circles around it continuously, firing off one shaft after another.

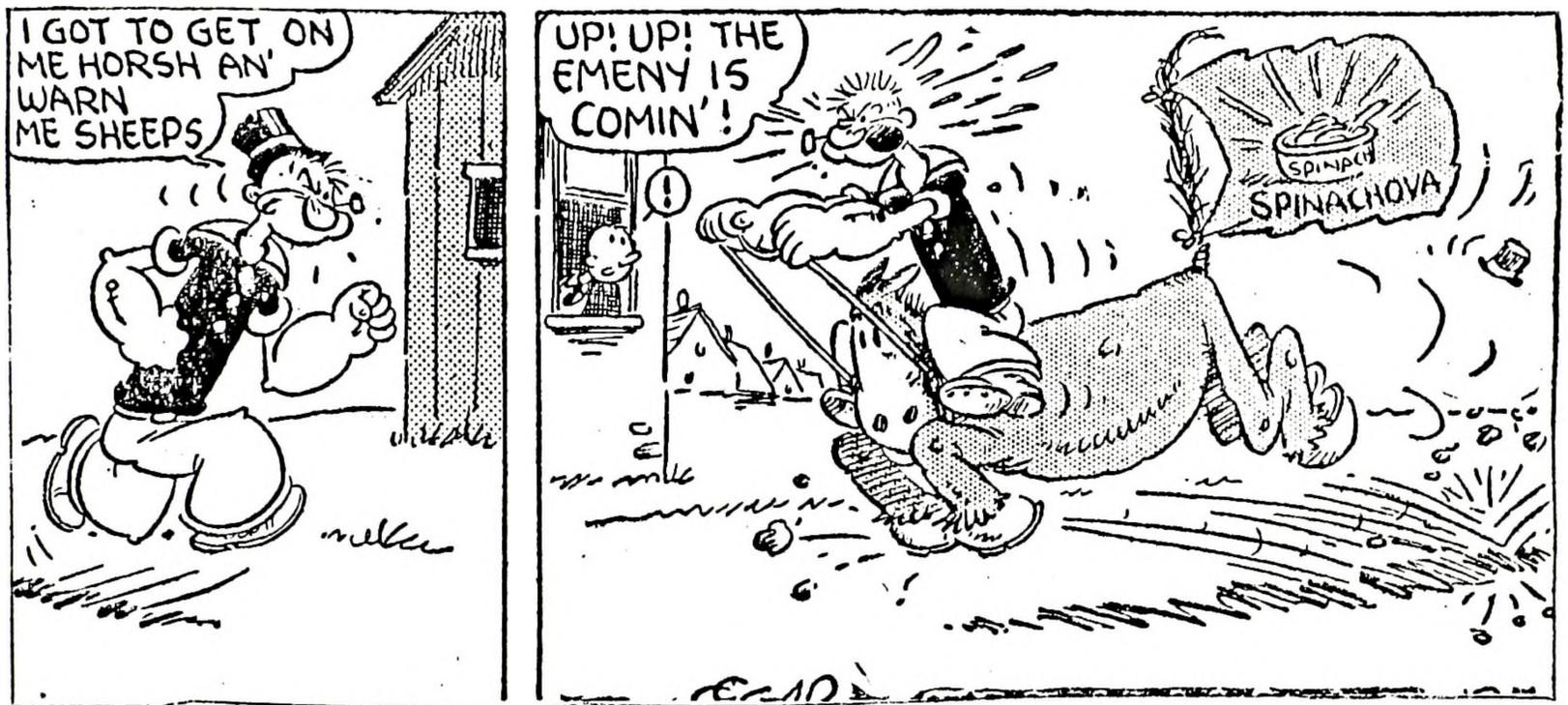


23 October 1935. — To anyone who lived through the 1930s, the satire here needs no comment. Nor, perhaps, to anyone living through the 1960s.

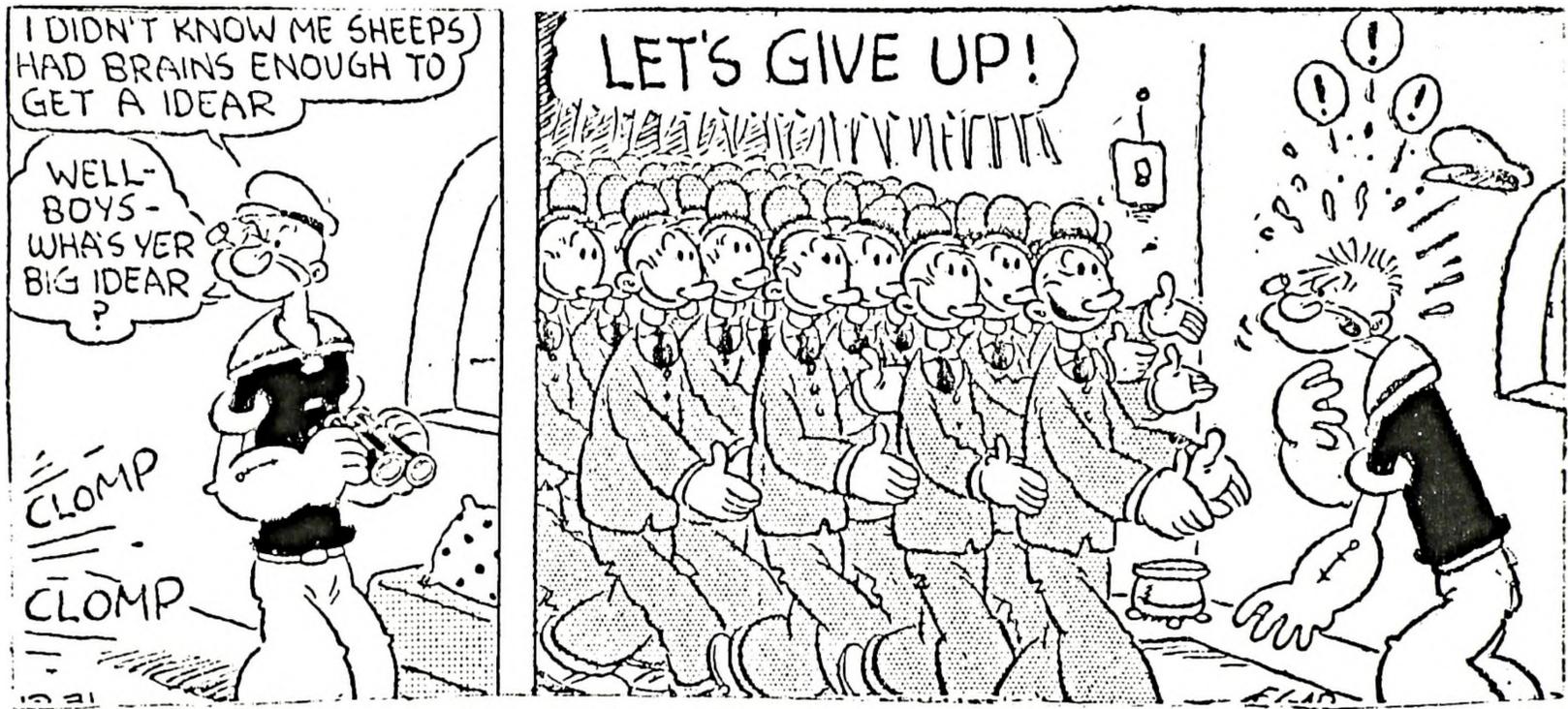
Historically, Byzantium provides by far the most striking example: "In the third decade of the 11th century it seemed that [Byzantium] was after all, under God, to realize its age-old profession and to reunite the Mediterranean under the sceptre of a new Augustus or Trajan. The precise opposite, as we know, came in the event. Within fifty years the resurgent empire was struck down, never to rise again: not so much by external powers or pressure as by malignant internal diseases... In the City [Constantinople] the old tradition of universal, imperial peace, survived. The citizens and the bureaucracy detested war and everything connected with it; and would never realise or come to terms with the stark truth that survival, not to speak of progress, depended on continual military preparedness and efficiency. Thus when the triumph of Basil II seemed for a moment to have restored the *Pax Romana* they were too ready to assume, in defiance of all experience, a return of the Kingdom of Saturn. They dropped their guard, and insulted their defenders. Retribution was prompt." (Romilly JENKINS, *Byzantium*, 1966, pp. 376-7).



3 December 1935. — Under the threat of foreign invasion or other crisis, governments characteristically change forms. But not essences — revolution or no, that remains the same, indeed more powerful. That is the central theme of Bertrand de Jouvenel, *Power, The Natural History of Its Growth* (Geneva, 1945): Replacing Louis XVI by Napoleon did not change the character of French life or the aims of French foreign policy, it only made the State's powers over its citizens far greater. Similarly, under the Bolsheviks the tyrannies of Czardom and Russian expansionism continued, only more efficiently. John Milton, observing the results of an earlier revolution in his own day, drew the same conclusion: "New Presbyter is but Old Priest writ large." (*On the New Forces of Conscience under the Long Parliament, 1645-46*).



7 December 1935. — Vignettes of American patriotism six years before Pearl Harbour. Or Canadian, for that matter. Robert Allen was fond of reminding Canadians how during the weeks before World War II broke out, the *Toronto Daily Star* resolutely refused to give headlines to European political developments; it ran installments of Lawrence Stallings' pacifist picture-books, and on the day war was declared its headline story told how one of the Dionne quintuplets had a cold.



31 December 1935. — “The receptive ability of the masses is very limited, their understanding is small, their forgetfulness great... Out of indolence and stupidity, they trot towards their doom.” Adolf HITLER, *Mein Kampf*, 1925.