

## CHAPTER LXXXV

### THE FATALISM OF THE MULTITUDE

ONE feature of thought and sentiment in the United States needs special examination because it has been by most observers either ignored or confounded with a phenomenon which is at bottom quite different. This is a fatalistic attitude of mind, which, since it disposes men to acquiesce in the rule of numbers, has been, when perceived, attributed to or identified with what is commonly called the Tyranny of the Majority. The tendency to fatalism is never far from mankind. It is one of the first solutions of the riddle of the earth propounded by metaphysics. It is one of the last propounded by science. It has at all times formed the background to religions. No race is naturally less disposed to a fatalistic view of things than is the Anglo-American, with its restless self-reliant energy.

*Nil actum reputans dum quid restaret agendum,*

its slender taste for introspection or meditation. Nevertheless, even in this people the conditions of life and politics have bred a sentiment or tendency which seems best described by the name of fatalism.

In small and rude communities, every free man, or at least every head of a household, feels his own significance and realizes his own independence. He relies on himself, he is little interfered with by neighbours or rulers.<sup>1</sup> His will and his action count for something in the conduct of the affairs of the community he belongs to, yet common affairs are few compared to those in which he must depend on his own exertions.

<sup>1</sup> The kind of self-reliant attitude I am seeking to describe is quite a different thing from the supposed "state of nature" in which a man has no legal relations with his fellows. It may exist (as in early Rome) among the members of a community closely united by legal ties.

The most striking pictures of individualism that literature has preserved for us are those of the Homeric heroes, and of the even more terrible and self-reliant warriors of the Scandinavian sagas, men like Ragnar Lodbrog and Egil, son of Skallagrim, who did not regard even the gods, but trusted to their own might and main. In more developed states of society organized on an oligarchic basis, such as were the feudal kingdoms of the Middle Ages, or in socially aristocratic countries such as most parts of Europe have remained down to our own time, the bulk of the people are no doubt in a dependent condition, but each person derives a certain sense of personal consequence from the strength of his group and of the person or family at the head of it. Moreover, the upper class, being the class which thinks and writes, as well as leads in action, impresses its own type upon the character of the whole nation, and that type is still individualistic, with a strong consciousness of personal free will, and a tendency for each man, if not to think for himself, at least to value and to rely on his own opinion.

Let us suppose, however, that the aristocratic structure of society has been dissolved, that the old groups have disappeared, that men have come to feel themselves members rather of the nation than of classes, or families, or communities within the nation, that a levelling process has destroyed the ascendancy of birth and rank, that large landed estates no longer exist, that many persons in what was previously the humbler class have acquired possession of property, that knowledge is easily accessible and the power of using it no longer confined to the few. Under such conditions of social equality the habit of intellectual command and individual self-confidence will have vanished from the leading class, which creates the type of national character, and will exist nowhere in the nation.

Let us suppose, further, that political equality has gone hand in hand with the levelling down of social eminence. Every citizen enjoys the same right of electing the representatives and officials, the same right of himself becoming a representative or an official. Every one is equally concerned in the conduct of public affairs, and since no man's opinion, however great his superiority in wealth, knowledge, or

personal capacity, is legally entitled to any more weight than another's, no man is entitled to set special value on his own opinion, or to expect others to defer to it; for pretensions to authority will be promptly resented. All disputes are referred to the determination of the majority, there being no legal distinction between the naturally strong and naturally weak, between the rich and the poor, between the wise and the foolish. In such a state of things the strong man's self-confidence and sense of individual force will inevitably have been lowered, because he will feel that he is only one of many, that his vote or voice counts for no more than that of his neighbour, that he can prevail, if at all, only by keeping himself on a level with his neighbour and recognizing the latter's personality as being every whit equal to his own.

Suppose, further, that all this takes place in an enormously large and populous country, where the governing voters are counted by so many millions that each individual feels himself a mere drop in the ocean, the influence which he can exert privately, whether by his personal gifts or by his wealth, being confined to the small circle of his town or neighbourhood. On all sides there stretches round him an illimitable horizon; and beneath the blue vault which meets that horizon there is everywhere the same busy multitude with its clamour of mingled voices which he hears close by. In this multitude his own being seems lost. He has the sense of insignificance which overwhelms us when at night we survey the host of heaven, and know that from even the nearest fixed star this planet of ours is invisible.

In such a country, where complete political equality is strengthened and perfected by complete social equality, where the will of the majority is absolute, unquestioned, always invoked to decide every question, and where the numbers which decide are so vast that one comes to regard them as one regards the largely working forces of nature, we may expect to find certain feelings and beliefs dominant in the minds of men.

One of these is that the majority must prevail. All free government rests on this belief, for there is no other way of working free government. To obey the majority is, therefore, both a necessity and a duty, a duty because the alternative would be ruin and the breaking-up of laws.

Out of this dogma there grows up another which is less distinctly admitted, and indeed held rather implicitly than consciously, that the majority is right. And out of both of these there grows again the feeling, still less consciously held, but not less truly operative, that it is vain to oppose or censure the majority.

It may seem that there is a long step from the first of these propositions to the second and third; and that, in fact, the very existence of a minority striving with a majority implies that there must be many who hold the majority to be wrong, and are prepared to resist it. Men do not at once abandon their views because they have been outvoted; they reiterate their views, they reorganize their party, they hope to prevail, and often do prevail in a subsequent trial of strength.

All this is doubtless involved in the very methods of popular government. But it is, nevertheless, true that the belief in the right of the majority lies very near to the belief that the majority must be right. As self-government is based on the notion that each man is more likely to be right than to be wrong, and that one man's opinion must be treated as equally good with another's, there is a presumption that when twenty thousand vote one way, and twenty-one thousand another, the view of the greater number is the better view. The habit of deference to a decision actually given strengthens this presumption, and weaves it into the texture of every mind. A conscientious citizen feels that he ought to obey the determination of the majority, and naturally prefers to think that which he obeys to be right. A citizen languidly interested in the question at issue finds it easier to comply with and adopt the view of the majority than to hold out against it. A small number of men with strong convictions or warm party feeling will, for a time, resist. But even they feel differently towards their cause after it has been defeated from what they did while it had still a prospect of success. They know that in the same proportion in which their supporters are dismayed, the majority is emboldened and confirmed in its views. It will be harder to fight a second battle than it was to fight the first, for there is (so to speak) a steeper slope of popular disapproval to be climbed. Thus, just as at the opening of a campaign, the event of the first collisions between the hostile armies has

great significance, because the victory of one is taken as an omen and a presage by both, so in the struggles of parties success at an incidental election works powerfully to strengthen those who succeed, and depress those who fail, for it inspires self-confidence or self-distrust, and it turns the minds of waverers. The very obscurity of the causes which move opinion adds significance to the result. So in the United States, when the elections in any State precede by a few weeks a presidential contest, their effect has sometimes been so great as virtually to determine that contest by filling one side with hope and the other with despondency. Those who prefer to swim with the stream are numerous everywhere, and their votes have as much weight as the votes of the keenest partisans. A man of convictions may insist that the arguments on both sides are after the polling just what they were before. But the average man will repeat his arguments with less faith, less zeal, more of a secret fear that he may be wrong, than he did while the majority was still doubtful; and after every reassertion by the majority of its judgment, his knees grow feebler, till at last they refuse to carry him into the combat.

The larger the scale on which the majority works, the more potent are these tendencies. When the scene of action is a small commonwealth, the individual voters are many of them personally known to one another, and the motives which determine their votes are understood and discounted. When it is a moderately-sized country, the towns or districts which compose it are not too numerous for reckoning to overtake and imagination to picture them, and in many cases their action can be explained by well-known causes which may be represented as transitory. But when the theatre stretches itself to a continent, when the number of voters is counted by many millions, the wings of imagination droop, and the huge voting mass ceases to be thought of as merely so many individual human beings no wiser or better than one's own neighbours. The phenomenon seems to pass into the category of the phenomena of nature, governed by far-reaching and inexorable laws whose character science has only imperfectly ascertained, and which she can use only by obeying. It inspires a sort of awe, a sense of individual impotence, like that which man feels when he contemplates the majestic and eternal forces of the

inanimate world. Such a feeling is even stronger when it operates, not on a cohesive minority which had lately hoped, or may yet hope, to become a majority, but on a single man or small group of persons cherishing some opinion which the mass disapproves. Thus out of the mingled feelings that the multitude will prevail, and that the multitude, because it will prevail, must be right, there grows a self-distrust, a despondency, a disposition to fall into line, to acquiesce in the dominant opinion, to submit thought as well as action to the encompassing power of numbers. Now and then a resolute man will, like Athanasius, stand alone against the world. But such a man must have, like Athanasius, some special spring of inward strength; and the difficulty of winning over others against the overwhelming weight of the multitude will, even in such a man, dull the edge of enterprise. An individual seeking to make his view prevail, looks forth on his hostile fellow-countrymen as a solitary swimmer, raised high on a billow miles from land, looks over the countless waves that divide him from the shore, and quails to think how small the chance that his strength can bear him thither.

This tendency to acquiescence and submission, this sense of the insignificance of individual effort, this belief that the affairs of men are swayed by large forces whose movement may be studied but cannot be turned, I have ventured to call the Fatalism of the Multitude. It is often confounded with the tyranny of the majority, but is at bottom different, though, of course, its existence makes abuses of power by the majority easier, because less apt to be resented. But the fatalistic attitude I have been seeking to describe does not imply any exercise of power by the majority at all. It may rather seem to soften and make less odious such an exercise of power, may even dispense with that exercise, because it disposes a minority to submit without the need of a command, to spontaneously renounce its own view and fall in with the view which the majority has expressed. In the fatalism of the multitude there is neither legal nor moral compulsion; there is merely a loss of resisting power, a diminished sense of personal responsibility, and of the duty to battle for one's own opinions, such as has been bred in some peoples by the belief in an overmastering fate. It is true that the force to which the citizen of

the vast democracy submit is a moral force, not that of an unapproachable Allah, nor of the unchangeable laws of matter. But it is a moral force acting on so vast a scale, and from causes often so obscure, that its effect on the mind of the individual may well be compared with that which religious or scientific fatalism engenders.

No one will suppose that the above sketch is intended to apply literally to the United States, where in some matters legal restrictions check a majority, where local self-government gives the humblest citizen a sphere for public action, where individualism is still in many forms and directions so vigorous. An American explorer, an American settler in new lands, an American man of business pushing a great enterprise, is a being as bold and resourceful as the world has ever seen. All I seek to convey is that there are in the United States signs of such a fatalistic temper, signs which one must expect to find wherever a vast population governs itself under a system of complete social and political equality, and which may grow more frequent as time goes on.

There exist in the American Republic several conditions which specially tend to create such a temper.

One of these is the unbounded freedom of discussion. Every view, every line of policy, has its fair chance before the people. No one can say that audience has been denied him, and comfort himself with the hope that, when he is heard, the world will come round to him. Under a repressive government, the sense of grievance and injustice feeds the flame of resistance in a persecuted minority. But in a country like this, where the freedom of the press, the right of public meeting, and the right of association and agitation have been legally extended and are daily exerted, more widely than anywhere else in the world, there is nothing to awaken that sense. He whom the multitude condemns or ignores has no further court of appeal to look to. Rome has spoken. His cause has been heard and judgment has gone against him.

Another is the intense faith which the Americans have in the soundness of their institutions, and in the future of their country. Foreign critics have said that they think themselves the special objects of the care of Divine Providence. If this be so, it is matter neither for surprise nor for sarcasm. They

are a religious people. They are trying, and that on the largest scale, the most remarkable experiment in government the world has yet witnessed. They have more than once been surrounded by perils which affrighted the stoutest hearts, and they have escaped from these perils into peace and prosperity. There is among pious persons a deep conviction—one may often hear it expressed on platforms and from pulpits with evident sincerity—that God has specially chosen the nation to work out a higher type of civilization than any other State has yet attained, and that this great work will surely be brought to a happy issue by the protecting hand that has so long guided it. And, even when the feeling does not take a theological expression, the belief in what is called the “Mission of the Republic” for all humanity is scarcely less ardent. But the foundation of the Republic is confidence in the multitude, in its honesty and good sense, in the certainty of its arriving at right conclusions. Pessimism is the luxury of a handful; optimism is the private delight, as well as public profession, of nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every thousand, for nowhere does the individual associate himself more constantly and directly with the greatness of his country.

Now, such a faith in the people, and in the forces that sway them, disposes a man to acquiescence and submission. He cannot long hold that he is right and the multitude wrong. He cannot suppose that the country will ultimately suffer because it refuses to adopt what he urges upon it. As he comes of an energetic stock, he will use all proper means to state his views, and give them every chance of prevailing. But he submits more readily than an Englishman would do, ay, even to what an Englishman would think an injury to his private rights. When his legal right has been infringed, an American will confidently proceed to enforce at law his claim to redress, knowing that even against the government a just cause will prevail. But if he fails at law, the sense of his individual insignificance will still his voice. It may seem a trivial illustration to observe that when a railway train is late, or a waggon drawn up opposite a warehouse door stops the horse-car for five minutes, the passengers take the delay far more coolly and uncomplainingly than Englishmen would do. But the feeling is the same as that which makes good citizens bear with the tyranny of

Bosses. It is all in the course of nature. Others submit; why should one man resist? What is he that he should make a fuss because he loses a few minutes, or is taxed too highly? The sense of the immense multitude around him presses down the individual; and, after all, he reflects, "things will come out right" in the end.

It is hard adequately to convey the impression which the vastness of the country and the swift growth of its population make upon the European visitor. I well remember how it once came on me after climbing a high mountain in an Eastern State. All around was thick forest; but the setting sun lit up peaks sixty or seventy miles away, and flashed here and there on the windings of some river past a town so far off as to seem only a spot of white. I opened my map, a large map, which I had to spread upon the rocks to examine, and tried to make out, as one would have done in Scotland or Switzerland, the points in the view. The map, however, was useless, because the whole area of the landscape beneath me covered only two or three square inches upon it. From such a height in Scotland the eye would have ranged from sea to sea. But here when one tried to reckon how many more equally wide stretches of landscape lay between this peak and the Mississippi, which is itself only a third of the way across the continent, the calculation seemed endless and was soon abandoned. Many an Englishman comes by middle life to know nearly all England like a glove. He has travelled on all the great railroads; there is hardly a large town in which he has not acquaintances, hardly a county whose scenery is not familiar to him. But no American can be familiar with more than a small part of his country, for his country is a continent. And all Americans live their life through under the sense of this prodigious and daily growing multitude around them, which seems vaster the more you travel, and the more you realize its uniformity.

We need not here inquire whether the fatalistic attitude I have sought to sketch is the source of more good or evil. It seems at any rate inevitable: nor does it fail to produce a sort of pleasure, for what the individual loses as an individual he seems in a measure to regain as one of the multitude. If the individual is not strong, he is at any rate as strong as any one else. His will counts for as much as any other will. He is

overborne by no superiority. Most men are fitter to make part of the multitude than to strive against it. Obedience is to most sweeter than independence; the Roman Catholic Church inspires in its children a stronger affection than any form of Protestantism, for she takes their souls in charge, and assures them that, with obedience, all will be well.

That which we are presently concerned to note is how greatly such a tendency as I have described facilitates the action of opinion as a governing power, enabling it to prevail more swiftly and more completely than in countries where men have not yet learned to regard the voice of the multitude as the voice of fate. Many submit willingly; some unwillingly, yet they submit. Rarely does any one hold out and venture to tell the great majority of his countrymen that they are wrong.

Moreover, public opinion acquires a solidity which strengthens the whole body politic. Questions on which the masses have made up their minds pass out of the region of practical discussion. Controversy is confined to minor topics, and however vehemently it may rage over these, it disturbs the great underlying matters of agreement no more than a tempest stirs the depths of the Atlantic. Public order becomes more easily maintained, because individuals and small groups have learned to submit even when they feel themselves aggrieved. The man who murmurs against the world, who continues to preach a hopeless cause, incurs contempt, and is apt to be treated as a sort of lunatic. He who is too wise to murmur and too proud to go on preaching to unheeding ears comes to think that if his doctrine is true, yet the time is not ripe for it. He may be in error; but if he is right, the world will ultimately see that he is right even without his effort. One way or another he finds it hard to believe that this vast mass and force of popular thought in which he lives and moves can be ultimately wrong. *Securus indicat orbis terrarum.*