

times (though not always) replaced in a serious crisis by a firmness in repressing disorders which some European governments may envy. Men who are thoroughly awakened to the need for enforcing the law, enforce it all the more resolutely because it has the whole weight of the people behind it.

CHAPTER XCVIII

THE TRUE FAULTS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

WE have seen that the defects commonly attributed to democratic government are not specially characteristic of the United States. It remains to inquire what are the peculiar blemishes which the country does show. So far as regards the constitutional machinery of the Federal and of the State government this question has been answered in earlier chapters. It is now rather the tendency of the institutions generally, the disposition and habits of the governing people, that we have to consider. The word Democracy is often used to mean a spirit or tendency, sometimes the spirit of revolution, sometimes the spirit of equality. For our present purpose it is better to take it as denoting simply a form of government, that in which the numerical majority rules, deciding questions of state by the votes, whether directly, as in the ancient republics, or mediately, as in modern representative government, of the body of citizens, the citizens being if not the whole, at least a very large proportion of the adult males. The inquiry may begin with the question, What are the evils to which such a form of government is by its nature exposed? and may then proceed to ascertain whether any other defects exist in the United States government which, though traceable to democracy, are not of its essence, but due to the particular form which it has there taken.

It is an old maxim that republics live by Virtue — that is, by the maintenance of a high level of public spirit and justice among the citizens. If the republic be one in which power is confined to, or practically exercised by, a small educated class, the maintenance of this high level is helped by the sense of personal dignity which their position engenders. If the republic itself be small, and bear rule over others, patriotism

may be intense, and the sense of the collective dignity of the state may ennoble the minds of the citizens, make them willing to accept sacrifices for its sake, to forego private interests and suppress private resentments, in order to be strong against the outer world. But if the state be very large, and the rights of all citizens equal, we must not expect them to rise above the average level of human nature. Rousseau and Jefferson will tell us that this level is high, that the faults which governments have hitherto shown are due to the selfishness of privileged persons and classes, that the ordinary unsophisticated man will love justice, desire the good of others, need no constraint to keep him in the right path. Experience will contradict them, and whether it talks of Original Sin or adopts some less scholastic phrase, will recognize that the tendencies to evil in human nature are not perhaps as strong, but as various and abiding even in the most civilized societies, as its impulses to good. Hence the rule of numbers means the rule of ordinary mankind, without those artificial helps which their privileged position has given to limited governing classes, though also, no doubt, without those special temptations which follow in the wake of power and privilege.

Since every question that arises in the conduct of government is a question either of ends or of means, errors may be committed by the ruling power either in fixing on wrong ends or in choosing wrong means to secure those ends. It is now, after long resistance by those who maintained that they knew better what was good for the people than the people knew themselves, at last agreed that as the masses are better judges of what will conduce to their own happiness than are the classes placed above them, they must be allowed to determine ends. This is in fact the essence of free or popular government, and the justification for vesting power in numbers. But assuming the end to be given, who is best qualified to select the means for its accomplishment? To do so needs in many cases a knowledge of the facts, a skill in interpreting them, a power of forecasting the results of measures, unattainable by the mass of mankind. Such knowledge is too high for them. It is attainable only by trained economists, legists, statesmen. If the masses attempt it they will commit mistakes not less serious than those which befall a litigant who insists on con-

ducting a complicated case instead of leaving it to his attorney and counsel. But in popular governments this distinction between ends and means is apt to be forgotten. Often it is one which cannot be sharply drawn, because some ends are means to larger ends, and some means are desired not only for the sake of larger ends, but for their own sakes also. And the habit of trusting its own wisdom and enjoying its own power, in which the multitude is encouraged by its leaders and servants, disposes it to ignore the distinction even where the distinction is clear, and makes it refer to the direct arbitrament of the people matters which the people are unfit to decide, and which they might safely leave to their trained ministers or representatives. Thus we find that the direct government of the multitude may become dangerous not only because the multitude shares the faults and follies of ordinary human nature, but also because it is intellectually incompetent for the delicate business of conducting the daily work of administration, *i.e.* of choosing and carrying out with vigour and promptitude the requisite executive means. The People, though we think of a great entity when we use the word, means nothing more than so many millions of individual men. There is a sense in which it is true that the people are wiser than the wisest man. But what is true of their ultimate judgment after the lapse of time sufficient for full discussion, is not equally true of decisions that have to be promptly taken.

What are the consequences which we may expect to follow from these characteristics of democracy and these conditions under which it is forced to work?

First, a certain commonness of mind and tone, a want of dignity and elevation in and about the conduct of public affairs, an insensibility to the nobler aspects and finer responsibilities of national life.

Secondly, a certain apathy among the luxurious classes and fastidious minds, who find themselves of no more account than the ordinary voter, and are disgusted by the superficial vulgarities of public life.

Thirdly, a want of knowledge, tact, and judgment in the details of legislation, as well as in administration, with an inadequate recognition of the difficulty of these kinds of work,

and of the worth of special experience and skill in dealing with them. Because it is incompetent, the multitude will not feel its incompetence, and will not seek or defer to the counsels of those who possess the requisite capacity.

Fourthly, laxity in the management of public business. The persons entrusted with such business being only average men, thinking themselves and thought of by others as average men, and not rising to a due sense of their responsibilities, may succumb to the temptations which the control of legislation and the public funds present, in cases where persons of a more enlarged view and with more of a social reputation to support would remain incorruptible. To repress such derelictions of duty is every citizen's duty, but for that reason it is in large communities apt to be neglected. Thus the very causes which implant the mischief favour its growth.

The above-mentioned tendencies are all more or less observable in the United States. As each of them has been described already in its proper place, a summary reference may here be sufficient to indicate their relation to the democratic form of government and to the immanent spirit or theory which lies behind that form.

The tone of public life is lower than one expects to find it in so great a nation. Just as we assume that an individual man will at any supreme moment in his own life rise to a higher level than that on which he usually moves, so we look to find those who conduct the affairs of a great state inspired by a sense of the magnitude of the interests entrusted to them. Their horizon ought to be expanded, their feeling of duty quickened, their dignity of attitude enhanced. Human nature with all its weaknesses does show itself capable of being thus roused on its imaginative side; and in Europe, where the traditions of aristocracy survive, everybody condemns as mean or unworthy acts done or language held by a great official which would pass unnoticed in a private citizen. It is the principle of *noblesse oblige* with the sense of duty and trust substituted for that of mere hereditary rank.

Such a sentiment is comparatively weak in America. A cabinet minister, or senator, or governor of a State, sometimes even a President, hardly feels himself more bound by it than the director of a railway company or the mayor of a town does

in Europe. Not assuming himself to be individually wiser, stronger, or better than his fellow-citizens, he acts and speaks as though he were still simply one of them, and so far from magnifying his office and making it honourable, seems anxious to show that he is the mere creature of the popular vote, so filled by the sense that it is the people and not he who governs as to fear that he should be deemed to have forgotten his personal insignificance. There is in the United States abundance of patriotism, that is to say, of a passion for the greatness and happiness of the Republic, and a readiness to make sacrifices for it. The history of the Civil War showed that this passion is at least as strong as in England or France. There is no want of an appreciation of the collective majesty of the nation, for this is the theme of incessant speeches, nor even of the past and future glories of each particular State in the Union. But these sentiments do not bear their appropriate fruit in raising the conception of public office, of its worth and its dignity. The newspapers assume public men to be selfish and cynical. Disinterested virtue is not looked for, is perhaps turned into ridicule where it exists. The hard commercial spirit which pervades the meetings of a joint-stock company is the spirit in which most politicians speak, and are not blamed for speaking, of public business. Something, especially in the case of newspapers, must be allowed for the humorous tendencies of the American mind, which likes to put forward the absurd and even vulgar side of things for the sake of getting fun out of them. But after making such allowances, the fact remains that, although no people is more emotional, and even in a sense more poetical, in no country is the ideal side of public life, what one may venture to call the heroic element in a public career, so ignored by the mass and repudiated by the leaders. This affects not only the elevation but the independence and courage of public men; and the country suffers from the want of what we call distinction in its conspicuous figures.

I have discussed in a previous chapter the difficulties which surround the rule of public opinion where it allows little discretion to its agents, relying upon its own competence to supervise administration and secure the legislation which a progressive country needs. The American masses have been

obliged, both by democratic theory and by the structure of their government, to proceed upon the assumption of their own competence. They have succeeded better than could have been expected. No people except the choicest children of England, long trained by the practice of local self-government at home and in the colonies before their revolt, could have succeeded half so well. Nevertheless the masses of the United States as one finds them to-day show what are the limitations of the average man. They can deal with broad and simple issues, especially with issues into which a moral element enters. They spoke out with a clear strong voice upon slavery, when at last it had become plain that slavery must either spread or vanish, and threw themselves with enthusiasm into the struggle for the Union. Their instinctive dislike for foreign complications as well as for acquisitions of new territory has repeatedly checked the too active diplomacy of ambitious politicians. Their sense of national and commercial honour has defeated more than one mischievous scheme for tampering with the public debt. But when a question of intricacy presents itself, requiring either keen foresight, exact reasoning, or wide knowledge, they are at fault. Questions relating to currency and coinage, free trade and protection, improvements in the machinery of constitutions or of municipal governments, the control of corporations by the law, the method of securing purity of elections, these are problems which have continued to baffle them, just as the Free Soil question did before the war or the reconstruction of the revolted Southern States for a long time after it.¹ In those two instances a solution came about, but in the former it was not so much effected by the policy of the people or their statesmen as forced on them by events, in the latter it has left serious evils behind.

Is this a defect incidental to all popular governments, or is there anything in the American system specially calculated to produce it?

¹ I do not deny that an American critic of the English Government might point to one problem by which the British Parliament has been baffled for two or three generations, and I will even admit that the American people might probably have settled it sooner than the British Parliament is thought likely to do. Had Britain been either a monarchy like that of Germany, or a democracy like that of the United States, she would probably have been more successful in this particular matter.

A state must of course take the people as it finds them, with such elements of ignorance and passion as exists in masses of men everywhere. Nevertheless, a representative or parliamentary system provides the means of mitigating the evils to be feared from ignorance or haste, for it vests the actual conduct of affairs in a body of specially chosen and presumably specially qualified men, who may themselves entrust such of their functions as need peculiar knowledge or skill to a smaller governing body or bodies selected in respect of their more eminent fitness. By this method the defects of democracy are remedied, while its strength is retained. The masses give their impulse to the representatives: the representatives, directed by the people to secure certain ends, bring their skill and experience to bear on the choice and application of the best means. The Americans, however, have not so constructed or composed their representative bodies as to secure a large measure of these benefits. The legislatures are disjoined from the administrative offices. The members of legislatures are not chosen for their ability or experience, but are, five-sixths of them, little above the average citizen. They are not much respected or trusted, and finding no exceptional virtue expected from them, they behave as ordinary men do when subjected to temptations. The separation of the executive from the legislature is a part of the constitutional arrangements of the country, and has no doubt some advantages. The character of the legislatures is due to a mistaken view of human equality and an exaggerated devotion to popular sovereignty. It is a result of democratic theory pushed to extremes, but is not necessarily incidental to a democratic government. The government of England, for instance, has now become substantially a democracy, but there is no reason why it should imitate America in either of the points just mentioned; nor does democratic France, apt enough to make a bold use of theory, seem to have pushed theory to excess in these particular directions. I do not, however, deny that a democratic system makes the people self-confident, and that self-confidence may easily pass into a jealousy of delegated power, an undervaluing of skill and knowledge, a belief that any citizen is good enough for any political work. This is perhaps more likely to happen with a people who have really reached a high level of political

competence: and so one may say that the American democracy is not better just because it is so good. Were it less educated, less shrewd, less actively interested in public affairs, less independent in spirit, it might be more disposed, like the masses in Europe, to look up to the classes which have hitherto done the work of governing. So perhaps the excellence of rural local self-government has lowered the conception of national government. The ordinary American farmer or shopkeeper or artisan bears a part in the local government of his township or village, or county, or small municipality. He is quite competent to discuss the questions that arise there. He knows his fellow-citizens, and can, if he takes the trouble, select the fittest of them for local office. No high standard of fitness is needed, for the work of local administration can be adequately despatched by any sensible man of business habits. Taking his ideas from this local government, he images Congress to himself as nothing more than a larger town council or board of county commissioners, the President and his Cabinet as a sort of bigger mayor and city treasurer and education superintendent; he is therefore content to choose for high Federal posts such persons as he would elect for these local offices. They are such as he is himself; and it would seem to him a disparagement of his own civic worth were he to deem his neighbours, honest, hard-working, keen-witted men, unfit for any places in the service of the Republic.

A European critic may remark that this way of presenting the case ignores the evils and losses which defective government involves. "If," he will say, "the mass of mankind possess neither the knowledge nor the leisure nor the skill to determine the legislation and policy of a great state, will not the vigour of the commonwealth decline and its resources be squandered? Will not a nation ruled by its average men in reliance on their own average wisdom be overtaken in the race of prosperity or overpowered in a warlike struggle by a nation of equal resources which is guided by its most capable minds?" The answer to this criticism is that America has hitherto been able to afford to squander her resources, and that no other state threatens her. With her wealth and in her position she can with impunity commit errors which might be fatal to the nations of Western Europe.

The comparative indifference to political life of the educated and wealthy classes which is so much preached at by American reformers and dwelt on by European critics is partly due to this attitude of the multitude. These classes find no smooth and easy path lying before them. Since the masses do not look to them for guidance, they do not come forward to give it. If they wish for office they must struggle for it, avoiding the least appearance of presuming on their social position. I think, however, that the abstention of the upper class is largely ascribable to causes, set forth in a previous chapter, that have little to do with democracy, and while believing that the United States have suffered from this abstention, do not regard it as an inseparable incident of their government. Accidental causes, such as the Spoils System, which is a comparatively recent and evidently curable distemper, have largely contributed to it.

The Spoils System reminds us of the Machine and the whole organization of Rings and Bosses. This ugliest feature in the politics of the country could not have grown up save under the rule of the multitude; and some of the arrangements which have aided its growth, such as the number and frequency of elections, have been dictated by what may be called the narrow doctrinaireism of democracy. It is not, however, necessarily incident to popular government, as appears by the fact that it flourishes in America only, where it is due to peculiar conditions which might be removed without rendering the government less truly popular. The city masses may improve if immigration declines; offices may cease to be the reward of party victory; the better citizens may throw themselves more actively into political work.

The many forms in which wealth displays its power point to a source of evil more deep-seated than the last, and one which, though common to all governments, is specially dangerous in a democracy. For democracy, in relying on the average citizen, relies on two things, the personal interest which he has in good government and the public virtue which makes him desire it for the sake of the community. Wealth, skilfully used, can overcome the former motive, because the share of the average man in the State is a small one, less than the gain by which wealth may tempt him. As for virtue, the

average man's standard depends on the standard maintained by the public opinion of other average men. Now the sight of wealth frequently prevailing over the sense of duty, with no punishment following, lowers this standard, and leads opinion to accept as inevitable what it knows to be harmful, till only some specially audacious offender stirs the public wrath. Under arbitrary governments one expects a low level of honour in officials, because they are not responsible to the people, and in the people, because they have no power. One looks for renovation to freedom, and struggles for freedom accordingly. If similar evils appear under a government which is already free, the remedy is less obvious and the prospect darker.

Such corruption as exists in the United States will not, however, be ascribed to its democratic government by any one who remembers that corruption was rife in the English Parliament a century and a half ago, in English constituencies forty years ago, and now prevails not only under the despotism of Russia but also (less widely) in some other European monarchies. There are diseases which attack the body politic, like the natural body, at certain stages of growth, but disappear when a nation has passed into another stage, or when sedulous experimentation has discovered the appropriate remedy. The corruption of Parliament in Sir Robert Walpole's days characterized a period of transition when power had passed to the House of Commons, but the control of the people over the House had not yet been fully established, and when, through a variety of moral causes, the tone of the nation was comparatively low. The corruption of the electorate in English boroughs appeared when a seat had become an object of desire to rich men, while yet the interest of the voters in public affairs was so feeble that they were willing to sell their votes, and their number often so small that each vote fetched a high price. The growth of intelligence and independence among the people, as well as the introduction of severe penalties for bribery, and the extinction of small constituencies, have now almost extinguished electoral corruption. Similar results may be obtained in American constituencies by better ballot and election laws, such as are now being tried in nearly all the States.

It is not, however, only in the way of bribery at popular elections that the influence of wealth is felt. It taints the election of Federal senators by State legislatures. It induces officials who ought to guard the purity of the ballot box to temper with returns. It procures legislation in the interests of commercial undertakings. It supplies the funds for maintaining party organizations and defraying the enormous costs of electoral campaigns, and demands in return sometimes a high administrative post, sometimes a foreign mission, sometimes favours for a railroad, sometimes a clause in a tariff bill, sometimes a lucrative contract. Titles and ribands it cannot, as in Europe, demand, for these the country happily knows not; yet these would be perhaps less harmful than the recompenses it now obtains. One thing alone it can scarcely ever buy,—impunity for detected guilt. The two protections which the people retain are criminal justice, and the power, when an election comes, of inflicting condign chastisement not only on the men over whose virtue wealth has prevailed, but even over the party in State, or nation, which they have compromised. Thus the money power is held at bay, and though cities suffer terribly, and national interests seriously, the general tone of public honour does not seem to be at present declining. It would, I think, improve, but for the peculiar facilities which the last few years have revealed for the action of great corporations, wielding enormous pecuniary resources, but keeping in the background the personality of those who direct these resources for their own behoof.

Of the faults summarized in this chapter, other than the influence of wealth, those which might seem to go deepest, because they have least to do with the particular constitutional arrangements of the country, and are most directly the offspring of its temper and habits, are the prominence of inferior men in politics and the absence of distinguished figures. The people are good, but not good enough to be able to dispense with efficient service by capable representatives and officials, wise guidance by strong and enlightened leaders. They are neither well served nor well led.

If it were clear that these are the fruits of liberty and equality, the prospects of the world would be darker than we have been wont to think them. They are, however, the fruits

not of liberty and equality, but of an optimism which has underrated the inherent difficulties of politics and inherent failings of human nature, of a theory which has confused equality of civil rights and duties with equality of capacity, and of a thoughtlessness which has forgotten that the problems of the world and the dangers which beset society are always putting on new faces and appearing in new directions. The Americans started their Republic with a determination to prevent abuses of power such as they had suffered from the British Crown. Freedom seemed the one thing necessary; and freedom was thought to consist in cutting down the powers of legislatures and officials. Freedom was the national boast during the years that followed down till the Civil War; and in the delight of proclaiming themselves superior in this regard to the rest of the world they omitted to provide themselves with further requisites for good government, and forgot that power may be abused in other ways than by monarchic tyranny or legislative usurpation. They continued to beat the drum along the old ramparts erected in 1776 and 1789 against George III., or those who might try to imitate him, when the enemy had moved quite away from that side of the position, and was beginning to threaten their rear. No maxim was more popular among them than that which declares eternal vigilance to be the price of freedom. Unfortunately their vigilance took account only of the old dangers, and did not note the development of new ones, as if the captain of a man-of-war were to think only of his guns and armour-plating, and neglect to protect himself against torpedoes. Thus abuses were suffered to grow up, which seemed trivial in the midst of so general a prosperity; and good citizens who were occupied in other and more engrossing ways, allowed politics to fall into the hands of mean men. The efforts which these citizens are now making to recover the control of public business would have encountered fewer obstacles had they been made sooner. But the obstacles will be overcome. No one, I think, who has studied either the history of the American people, or their present mind and habits, will conclude that there is among them any jealousy of merit, any positive aversion to culture or knowledge. Neither the political arrangements nor the social and economical con-

ditions of the country tend at this moment to draw its best intellects and loftiest characters into public life. But it is not the democratic temper of the people that stands in the way.

The commonest of the old charges against democracy was that it passed into ochlocracy. I have sought to show that this has not happened, and is not likely to happen in America. The features of mob-rule do not appear in her system, whose most characteristic faults are the existence of a professional class using government as a means of private gain and the menacing power of wealth. Plutocracy, which the ancients contrasted with democracy, has shown in America an inauspicious affinity for certain professedly democratic institutions.

Perhaps no form of government needs great leaders so much as democracy. The fatalistic habit of mind perceptible among the Americans needs to be corrected by the spectacle of courage and independence taking their own path, and not looking to see whither the mass are moving. Those whose material prosperity tends to lap them in self-complacency and dull the edge of aspiration, need to be thrilled by the emotions which great men can excite, stimulated by the ideals they present, stirred to a loftier sense of what national life may attain. In some countries men of brilliant gifts may be dangerous to freedom; but the ambition of American statesmen has been schooled to flow in constitutional channels, and the Republic is strong enough to stand any strain to which the rise of heroes may expose her.

