CHAPTER CXVIII

THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

THE task of forecasting the future is one from which a writer does well to turn away, for the coasts of history are strewn with the wrecks of predictions launched by historians and philosophers. No such ambitious task shall be essayed by me. But as I have described the institutions of the American commonwealth as they stand at this moment, seldom expressing an opinion as to their vitality or the influences which are at work to modify them, I may reasonably be asked to state, before bringing this book to a close, what processes of change these institutions seem to be at this moment undergoing. Changes move faster in our age than they ever moved before, and America is a land of change. No one doubts that fifty years hence it will differ at least as much from what it is now as it differs now from the America which Tocqueville described. The causes whose action will mould it are too numerous, too complex, to subtly interwoven to make it possible to conjecture their joint result. All we can ever say of the future is that it will be unlike the present. I will therefore attempt, not to predict future changes, but only to indicate some of the processes of change now in progress which have gone far enough to let us see that they are due to causes of unmistakable potency, causes likely to continue in activity for some time to come.

I begin with a glance at the Federal system, whose equilibrium it has been the main object of the Federal Constitution to preserve. That equilibrium has been little disturbed. So far as law goes, it has suffered no change since the amendments to the Constitution which recorded and formulated the results of the Civil War. Before the war many Americans and most Europeans expected a dissolution of the Union,

either by such a loosening of the Federal tie as would reduce the Union to a mere league, or by the formation of several State groups wholly independent of one another. At this moment, however, nothing seems less likely than another secession. The States' Rights spirit has declined. The material interests of every part of the country are bound up with those of every other. The capital of the Eastern cities has been invested in mines in the West, in ironworks and manufactories in the South, in mortgages and railroads everywhere. The South and the West need this capital for their development, and are daily in closer business relations with the East. The produce of the West finds its way to the Atlantic through the ports of the East. Every produce market, every share market, vibrates in response to the Produce Exchange and Stock Exchange of New York. Each Part of the country has come to know the other parts far better than was possible in earlier times; and the habit of taking journeys hither and thither grows with the always-growing facilities of travel. Many families have sons or brothers in remote States; many students come from the West and the South to Eastern universities, and form ties of close friendship there. Railways and telegraphs are daily narrowing and compressing the vast area between ocean and ocean. As the civilized world was a larger world in the days of Herodotus than it is now,—for it took twice as many months to travel from the Caspian Sea to the Pillars of Hercules as it takes now to circumnavigate the globe; one was obliged to use a greater number of languages, and the journey was incomparably more dangerous,—so now the United States, with their sixty-six millions of people, extending from the Bay of Fundy to the Gulf of California, are a smaller country for all the purposes of government, of commerce, and of social intercourse, than they were before the cession of Louisiana in 1803, for it took longer then to go from Boston to Charleston than it takes now to go from Portland in Maine to Portland in Oregon, and the journey was far more costly and difficult.

Even the Pacific States, which might have seemed likely to form a community by themselves, are being drawn closer to those of the Mississippi basin. Population will in time become almost continuous along the lines of the Northern and

Southern Pacific Railways, and though the deserts of Nevada may remain unreclaimed, prosperous communities round the Great Salt Lake will form a link between California and the Rocky Mountain States. With more frequent communication, local peculiarities and local habits of thought diminish; the South grows every day less distinctively Southern, and country-folk are more influenced by city ideas. There is now not a single State with any material interest that would be benefited, probably none with any sentiment that would be gratified, by separation from the body of the Union. No great question has arisen tending to bind States into groups and stimulating them to joint action. The chief problems which lie before the country wear an aspect substantially the same in its various sections, and public opinion is divided on them in those sections upon lines generally similar. In a word, the fact that the government is a Federal one does not at this moment seem to make any difference to the cohesion of the body politic; the United States are no more likely to dissolve than if they were a unified republic like France or a unified monarchy like Italy.

As secession is improbable, so also is the extinction of the several States by absorption into the central government. It was generally believed in Europe, when the North triumphed over secession in 1865, that the Federal system was virtually at an end. The legal authority of Congress and the President had been immensely developed during the struggle; a powerful army, flushed with victory, stood ready to enforce that authority; and there seemed reason to think that the South, which had fought so stubbornly, would have to be kept down during many years by military force. However, none of these apprehended results followed. The authority of the central government presently sank back within its former limits, some of the legislation based on the constitutional amendments which had extended it for certain purposes being cut down by judicial decision. The army was disbanded; self-government was soon restored in the lately insurgent States, and the upshot of the years of civil war and reconstruction has been, while extinguishing the claim of State sovereignty, to replace the formerly admitted State rights upon a legal basis as firm as they ever occupied before. At this moment State rights

are not in question, nor has either party an interest in advocating the supersession of State action in any department of government. The conservatism of habit and well-settled legal doctrine which would resist any such proposal is very strong. State autonomy, as well as local government within each State, is prized by every class in the community, and bound up with the personal interest of those who feel that these comparatively limited spheres offer a scope to their ambition which a wider theatre might deny.

It is nevertheless impossible to ignore the growing strength of the centripetal and unifying forces. I have already referred to the influence of easier and cheaper communications, of commerce and finance, of the telegraph, of the filling up of the intermediate vacant spaces in the West. There is an increasing tendency to invoke congressional legislation to deal with matters, such as railroads, which cannot be adequately handled by State laws, or to remove divergencies, such as those in bankrupt laws and the law of marriage and divorce, which give rise to practical inconveniences. Those who advocate the prohibition of the sale of intoxicants are more and more apt to carry their action into the Federal sphere, while admitting that the Federal Constitution would need amendment in order to enable Congress to effect what they desire. So the various parties which profess to champion the interests of the farmers or of workingmen recur to the Federal government as the only agency strong enough and wide-reaching enough to give effect to their proposals, most of which indeed would obviously be impracticable if tried in the narrow area of one or a few States. State patriotism, State rivalry, State vanity, are no doubt still conspicuous, yet the political interest felt in State governments is slighter than it was forty years ago, while national patriotism has become warmer and more pervasive. The *rôle* of the State is socially and morally, if not legally, smaller now than it then was, and ambitious men look on a State legislature as little more than a stepping-stone to Congress. Moreover, the interference of the Federal Executive to suppress by military power disorders which State authorities have seemed unable or unwilling to deal with has recently shown how great a reserve of force lies in its hands, and has led peace-loving citizens to look to it as their ultimate resort in troublous times. It would be rash to assert that disjunctive forces will never again reveal themselves, setting the States against the National government, and making States' Rights once more a matter of practical controversy. But any such force is likely, so far as we can now see, to prove transitory, whereas the centripetal forces are permanent and secular forces, working from age to age. Wherever in the modern world there has been a centrifugal movement, tending to break up a State united under one government, or to loosen the cohesion of its parts, the movement has sprung from a sentiment of nationality, and has been reinforced, in almost every case, by a sense of some substantial grievance or by a belief that material advantages were to be secured by separation. The cases of Holland and Belgium, of Hungary and Germanic Austria, of the Greeks and Bulgarians in their struggle with the Turks, of Iceland in her struggle with Denmark, all illustrate this proposition. When such disjunctive forces are absent, the more normal tendency to aggregation and centralization prevails. In the United States all the elements of a national feeling are present, race,[1] language, literature, pride in past achievements, uniformity of political habits and ideas; and this national feeling which unifies the people is reinforced by an immensely strong material interest in the maintenance of a single government over the breadth of the continent. It may therefore be concluded that while there is no present likelihood of change from a Federal to a consolidated republic, and while the existing legal rights and functions of the several States may remain undiminished for many years to come, the importance of the States will decline as the majesty and authority of the National government increase.

The next question to be asked relates to the component parts of the National government itself. Its equilibrium

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[1] The immense influx of immigrants has not greatly affected the sense of race unity, for the immigrant's child is almost always eager to become to all intents and purposes an American. Moreover, the immigrants are so dispersed over the country that no single section of them is in any State nearly equal to the native population. However, here and there in the West, Germans have tried to appropriate townships or villages, and keep English-speaking folk at a distance; and in Wisconsin their demand to have German taught regularly in the schools lately gave rise to some bitterness. But the very fact that the feeling of racial distinction produces no results more serious than these shows how far that feeling is from being a source of political danger.

stands now as stable as at any former epoch. Yet it has twice experienced violent oscillations. In the days of Jackson, and again in those of Lincoln, the Executive seemed to outweigh Congress. In the days of Tyler, Congress threatened the Executive, while in those of Andrew Johnson it reduced the Executive to impotence. That no permanent disturbance of the balance followed the latter of these oscillations shows how well the balance had been adjusted at starting. At this moment there is nothing to show that any one department is gaining on any other. The Judiciary, if indeed the judges can be called a political department, would seem to have less discretionary power than seventy years ago, for by their own decisions they have narrowed the scope of their discretion, determining points in which, had they remained open, the personal impulses and views of the Bench might have had room to play. Congress has been the branch of government with the largest facilities for usurping the powers of the other branches, and probably with the most disposition to do so. Congress has constantly tried to encroach both on the Executive and on the States, sometimes, like a wild bull driven into a corral, dashing itself against the imprisoning walls of the Constitution. But although Congress has succeeded in occupying nearly all of the area which the Constitution left vacant and unallotted between the several authorities it established, Congress has not become any more distinctly than in earlier days the dominant power in the State, the organ of national sovereignty, the irresistible exponent of the national will. In a country ruled by public opinion, it could hold this position only in virtue of its capacity for leading opinion, that is to say, of its courage, promptitude, and wisdom. Since it grows in no one of these qualities, it wins no greater ascendency; indeed its power, as compared with that of public opinion, seems rather to decline. Its division into two co-ordinate Houses is no doubt a source of weakness as well as of safety. Yet what is true of Congress as a whole is true of each House taken separately. The Senate, to which the eminence of many individual senators formerly gave a moral ascendency, has lost as much in the intellectual authority of its members as it has gained in their wealth. The House, with its far greater numbers and its far greater proportion of inexperienced members, suffers from the want of internal organization, and seems unable to keep pace with the increasing demands made on it for constructive legislation. Now and then the helplessness of the House when a party majority happens to be torn by internal dissensions, or the selfishness of the Senate when in its almost equally divided body the interests or animosities of individual senators have full room to play, causes delays and leads to compromises or half measures which exasperate even this all too patient people. One is sometimes inclined to think that Congress might lose its hold on the esteem and confidence of the nation, and sink into a subordinate position, were there any other authority which could be substituted for it. There is, however, no such authority, for law-making cannot be given to a person or to a court, while the State legislatures have the same faults as Congress in a greater degree. We may accordingly surmise that Congress will retain its present place; but so far as can be gathered from present phenomena, it will retain this place in respect not of the satisfaction of the people with its services, but of their inability to provide a better servant.

The weakness of Congress is the strength of the President. Though it cannot be said that his office has risen in power or dignity since 1789, there are reasons for believing that it may reach a higher point than it has occupied at any time since the Civil War. The tendency everywhere in America to concentrate power and responsibility in one man is unmistakable. There is no danger that the President should become a despot, that is, should attempt to make his will prevail against the will of the majority. But he may have a great part to play as the leader of the majority and the exponent of its will. He is in some respects better fitted both to represent and to influence public opinion than Congress is. No doubt he suffers from being the nominee of a party, because this draws on every act he does the hostility of zealots of the opposite party. But the number of voters who are not party zealots increases, increases from bad causes as well as from good causes; for as a capable President sways the dispassionately patriotic, so a crafty President can find means of playing upon those who have their own ends to serve. A vigorous personality attracts the multitude, and attracts it the more the huger it grows

and the more the characteristic weaknesses of Congress stand revealed; while a chief magistrate's influence, though his political opponents may complain of it, excites little alarm when exerted in leading a majority which acts through the constitutional organs of government. There may therefore be still undeveloped possibilities of greatness in store for the Presidents of the future. But as these possibilities depend, like the possibilities of the British and German Crowns, perhaps one may add of the Papacy, on the wholly unpredictable element of personal capacity in the men who may fill the office, we need speculate on them no further.

From the organs of government I pass to the party system, its machinery and its methods. Nothing in recent history suggests that the statesmen who claim to be party leaders, or the politicians who act as party managers, are disposed either to loosen the grip with which their organization has clasped the country, or to improve the methods it employs. Changes in party measures there will of course be in the future, as there have been in the past; but the professionals are not the men to make them changes for the better. The Machine will not be reformed from within: it must be assailed from without. Two heavy blows have been lately struck at it. The first was the Civil Service Reform Act of 1883. If this Act is honestly administered, and its principle extended to other Federal offices, if States and cities follow, as a few have done, in the wake of the National government, the Spoils System may before long be rooted out, and with that system the power of the Machine will crumble. The Spoils System has stood for some sixty years, and the bad habits it has formed cannot at once be unlearned. But its extinction will deprive professionals of their chief present motive for following politics. The tares which now infest the wheat will presently wither away, and the old enemy will have to sow a fresh crop of some other kind. The second blow has been the passing, in all the States but seven, of secret ballot laws, which have reduced the power of Machines and tended to make elections purer. And the third is the frequent appearance, not merely in Federal elections, but in State and municipal elections, of a body of independent men pledged to vote for honest candidates irrespective of party. The absence for a number of years past of genuine political issues dividing the two parties, which has worked ill in taking moral and intellectual life out of the parties, and making their contests mere scrambles for office, has at last worked well in disposing intelligent citizens to sit more loose to party ties, and to consider, since it is really on men rather than on measures that they are required to vote, what the personal merits of candidates are. Forty years ago, just at the time when the fruits of Jacksonism, that is to say, of wild democratic theory coupled with sordid and quite undemocratic practice, had begun to be felt by thoughtful persons, the urgency of the slavery question compelled the postponement of reforms in political methods, and made patriotic men fling themselves into party warfare with unquestioning zeal. When the winning of elections, no less than the winning of battles, meant the salvation of the Union, no one could stop to examine the machinery of party. For ten years after the war, the party which was usually in the majority in the North was the party which had saved the Union, and on that score commanded the devotion of its old adherents; while the opposite party was so much absorbed in struggling back to power that it did not think of mending its ways. During the last fifteen or twenty years, the war issues being practically settled, public-spirited citizens have addressed themselves to the task, which ought to have been undertaken in 1850, of purifying politics. Their efforts began with city government, where the evils were greatest, but have now become scarcely less assiduous in State and national politics.

Will these efforts continue, and be crowned by a growing measure of success?

To a stranger revisiting America at intervals, the progress seems to be steadily though very slowly upward. This is also the belief of those Americans who, having most exerted themselves in the struggle against Bosses and spoilsmen, have had most misrepresentation to overcome and most disappointments to endure. The Presidents of this generation are abler men than those of forty years ago, and less apt to be the mere creatures of a knot of party managers. The poisonous influence of slavery is no longer felt. There is every day less of sentimentalism, but not less of earnestness in political discussions. There is less blind obedience to party, less disposition to palliate sins committed from party motives. The number of able men who occupy themselves with scientific economics and politics is larger, their books and articles are more widely read. The press more frequently helps in the work of reform: the pulpit deals more largely with questions of practical philanthropy and public morals. That it should be taken as a good sign when the young men of a city throw themselves into politics, shows that the new generation is believed to have either a higher sense of public duty or a less slavish attachment to party ties than that whose votes have prevailed for the last twenty years. Above all, the nation is less self-sufficient and self-satisfied than it was in days when it had less to be proud of. Fifty years ago the Americans walked in a vain conceit of their own greatness and freedom and scorned instruction from the effete monarchies of the Old World, which repaid them with contemptuous indifference. No despot ever exacted more flattery from his courtiers than they from their statesmen. Now when Europe admires their power, envies their wealth, looks to them for instruction in not a few subjects, they have become more modest, and listen willingly to speakers and writers who descant upon their failings. They feel themselves strong enough to acknowledge their weaknesses, and are anxious that the moral life of the nation should be worthy of its expanding fortunes. As these happy omens have become more visible from year to year, there is a reasonable presumption that they represent a steady current which will continue to work for good. To judge of America rightly the observer must not fix his eye simply upon her present condition, seeking to strike a balance between the evil and the good that now appear. He must look back at what the best citizens and the most judicious strangers perceived and recorded fifty, thirty, twenty years ago, and ask whether the shadows these men saw were not darker than those of to-day, whether the forecasts of evil they were forced to form have not in many cases been belied by the event. Tocqueville was a sympathetic as well as penetrating observer. Many of the evils he saw, and which he thought inherent and incurable, have now all but vanished. Other evils have indeed revealed themselves which he did not discern, but these may prove as transient as those with which he affrighted European readers in 1834. The men I have met in America, whose recollections went back to the fourth decade of this century, agreed in saying that there was in those days a more violent and unscrupulous party spirit, a smaller respect for law, a greater disposition to violence, less respect for the opinion of the wise, a completer submission to the prejudices of the masses, than there is to-day. Neither the Irish nor the Germans had arrived upon the scene, but New York was already given over to spoilsmen. Great corporations had scarcely arisen; yet corruption was neither uncommon nor fatal to a politician's reputation. A retrospect which shows us that some evils have declined or vanished while the regenerative forces are more numerous and more active in combating new mischiefs than they ever were before, encourages the belief that the general stream of tendency is towards improvement, and will in time bring the public life of the country nearer to the ideal which democracy is bound to set before itself.

When the Americans say, as they often do, that they trust to time, they mean that they trust to reason, to the generally sound moral tone of the multitude, to a shrewdness which after failures and through experiments learns what is the true interest of the majority, and finds that this interest coincides with the teachings of morality. They can afford to wait, because they have three great advantages over Europe, an absence of class distinctions and class hatred, a diffusion of wealth among an immense number of small proprietors all interested in the defence of property, an exemption from chronic pauperism and economical distress, work being at most times abundant, many careers open, the still unoccupied or undeveloped West providing a safety valve available in times of depression. With these advantages the Americans conceive that were their country now left entirely to itself, so that full and free scope could be secured to the ameliorative forces, political progress would be sure and steady; the best elements would come to the top, and when the dregs had settled the liquor would run clear.

In a previous chapter I have observed that this sanguine view of the situation omits two considerations. One is that the country will not be left to itself. European immigration continues, and though more than two-thirds of the immigrants make valuable citizens, the remainder, many by their political ignorance and instability, some few by their proneness to embrace anti-social doctrines, are a source of danger to the community, lowering its tone, providing material for demagogues to work on, threatening outbreaks like those of Pennsylvania in 1877, of Cincinnati in 1884, of Chicago in 1886, of large districts in the West in 1893 and 1894.

The other fact to be borne in mind is of still graver import. There is a part of the Atlantic where the westward speeding steam-vessel always expects to encounter fogs. On the fourth or fifth day of the voyage, while still in bright sunlight, one sees at a distance a long low dark-gray line across the bows, and is told this is the first of the fog-banks which have to be traversed. Presently the vessel is upon the cloud, and rushes into its chilling embrace, not knowing what perils of icebergs may be shrouded within the encompassing gloom. So America, in her swift onward progress, sees, looming on the horizon and now no longer distant, a time of mists and shadows, wherein dangers may lie concealed whose form and magnitude she can scarcely yet conjecture. As she fills up her western regions with inhabitants, she sees the time approach when all the best land will have been occupied, and when the land now under cultivation will have been so far exhausted as to yield scantier crops even to more expensive culture. Although transportation may also have then become cheaper, the price of food will rise; farms will be less easily obtained and will need more capital to work them with profit; the struggle for existence will become more severe. And while the outlet which the West now provides for the overflow of the great cities will have become less available, the cities will have grown immensely more populous; pauperism, now confined to some six or seven of the greatest, will be more widely spread; wages will probably sink and work be less abundant. In fact the chronic evils and problems of old societies and crowded countries, such as we see them to-day in Europe, will have reappeared on this new soil.

High economic authorities pronounce that the beginnings of this time of pressure lie not more than thirty years ahead. Nearly all of the best arable land in the West is already occupied, so that the second and third best will soon begin to be cultivated; while the exhaustion already complained of in farms which have been under the plough for three or four decades will be increasingly felt. It will be a time of trial for democratic institutions. The future of the United States during the next half century sometimes presents itself to the mind as a struggle between two forces, the one beneficent, the other malign, the one striving to speed the nation on to a port of safety before this time of trial arrives, the other to retard its progress, so that the tempest may be upon it before the port is reached. And the question to which one reverts in musing on the phenomena of American politics is this — Will the progress now discernible towards a wiser public opinion and a higher standard of public life succeed in bringing the mass of the people up to the level of what are now the best districts in the country before the days of pressure are at hand? Or will existing evils prove so obstinate, and European immigration so continue to depress the average of intelligence and patriotism among the voters, that when the struggle for life grows far harder than it now is, the masses will yield to the temptation to abuse their power and will seek violent, and because violent, probably vain and useless remedies, for the evils which will afflict them? Some such are indeed now proposed, and receive a support which, small as it is, is larger than any one would thirty years ago have predicted for them.

If the crisis should arrive while a large part of the population still lacks the prudence and self-control which a democracy ought to possess, what result may be looked for? This is a question which no experience from similar crises in the past helps us to answer, for the phenomena will be new in the history of the world. There may be pernicious experiments tried in legislation. There may be — indeed there have been already — occasional outbreaks of violence. There may even be, though nothing at present portends it, a dislocation of the present frame of government. One thing, however, need not be apprehended, the thing with which alarmists most frequently terrify us: there will not be anarchy. The forces which restore order and maintain it when restored are as strong in America as anywhere else in the world.

While admitting the possibility of such a time of strife and danger, he who has studied America will not fail to note that she will have elements of strength for meeting it which are lacking in some European countries. The struggles of labour and capital, though they have of late years become more virulent, do not seem likely to take the form of a widely prevailing hatred between classes. The distribution of landed property among a great many small owners is likely to continue. The habits of freedom, together with the moderation and self-control which they foster, are likely to stand unimpaired, or to be even confirmed and mellowed by longer use. The restraining and conciliating influence of religion is stronger than in France or Germany, and more enlightened than in those continental countries where religion now seems strongest. I admit that no one can say how far the United States of fifty years hence will in these respects resemble the United States of to-day. But if we are to base our anticipations on the facts of to-day, we may look forward to the future, not indeed without anxiety, when we mark the clouds that hang on the horizon, yet with a hope that is stronger than anxiety.