

CHAPTER CXIX

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FUTURE

IF it be hard to forecast the development of political institutions and habits, how much harder to form a conception of what the economic and social life of the United States will have become when another half-century of marvellously swift material progress has more than quintupled its wealth and more than tripled its population; and when the number of persons pursuing arts and letters, and educated to enjoy the most refined pleasures of life, will have become proportionately greater than it is now. The changes of the last fifty years, great as they have been, may then prove to have been no greater than those which the next fifty will have brought. Prediction is even more difficult in this sphere than in the sphere of government, because the forces at work to modify society are more numerous, as well as far more subtle and complex, and because not only the commercial prosperity of the country, but its thought and culture are more likely than its politics to be affected by the course of events in the Old World. All I can attempt is, as in the last preceding chapter, to call attention to some of the changes which are now in progress, and to conjecture whether the phenomena we now observe are due to permanent or to transitory causes. I shall speak first of economic changes and their influence on certain current problems, next of the movements of population and possible alterations in its character, lastly, of the tendencies which seem likely to continue to affect the social and intellectual life of the nation.

The most remarkable economic feature of the years that have elapsed since the war has been the growth of great fortunes. There is a passage in the *Federalist*, written in 1788, which says, "the private fortunes of the President and

Senators, as they must all be American citizens, cannot possibly be sources of danger." Even in 1833, Tocqueville was struck by the equal distribution of wealth in the United States and the absence of capitalists. To-day, however, there are more great millionaires, as well as more men with a capital of from \$250,000 to \$1,000,000 (£50,000 to £200,000), in America than in any other country; and forty years hence it may probably contain as many large fortunes as will exist in all the countries of Europe put together. Nor are these huge accumulations due to custom and the policy of the law, which have in England kept property, and especially landed property, in the hands of a few by the so-called custom of primogeniture, whereas in the American States the influence of law has tended the other way. An American testator usually distributes his wealth among his children equally. However rich he may be, he does not expect his daughters to marry rich men, but is just as willing to see them mated to persons supporting themselves by their own efforts. And he is far more inclined than Europeans are to bestow large part of his wealth upon objects of public utility, instead of using it to found a family. In spite of these dispersing forces, great fortunes grow with the growing wealth of the country, and the opportunities it offers of amassing enormous piles by bold operations. Even an unspeculative business may, if skilfully conducted, bring in greater gains than can often be hoped for in Europe, because the scale of operations is in America so large that a comparatively small percentage of profit may mean a very large income. These causes are likely to be permanent; nor can any legislation that is compatible with the rights of property as now understood, do much to restrict them. We may therefore expect that the class of very rich men, men so rich as to find it difficult to spend their income in enjoying life, though they may go on employing it in business, will continue to increase.

It may be suggested that the great fortunes of to-day are due to the swift development of the West, so that after a time they will cease to arise in such numbers, while those we now see will have been scattered. The development of the West must, however, continue for forty or fifty years to come; and though the wealthy do not seek to keep their wealth together after their death by artificial means, many are the sons of the

rich who start with capital enough to give them a great advantage for further accumulation. There are as yet comparatively few careers to compete with business; nor is it as easy as in Europe to spend a fortune on pleasure. The idle rich of America, who, though relatively few, are numerous enough to form a class in the greatest Atlantic cities, seem by no means the most contented class in the country.

The growth of vast fortunes has helped to create a political problem, for they become a mark for the invective of the more extreme sections of the Labour or Socialist parties. But should their propaganda so far prosper as to produce legislative attacks upon accumulated wealth, such attacks will be directed (at least in the first instance), not against individual rich men, but against incorporated companies, since it is through corporations that wealth has made itself obnoxious. Why the power of these bodies should have grown so much greater in the United States than in Europe, and why they should be more often controlled by a small knot of men, are questions too intricate to be here discussed. Companies are in many ways so useful that any general diminution of the legal facilities for forming them seems improbable; but I conceive that they will be even more generally than hitherto subjected to special taxation; and that their power of taking and using public franchises will be further restricted. He who considers the irresponsible nature of the power which three or four men, or perhaps one man, can exercise through a great corporation, such as a railroad or telegraph company, the injury they can inflict on the public as well as on their competitors, the cynical audacity with which they have often used their wealth to seduce officials and legislators from the path of virtue, will find nothing unreasonable in the desire of the American masses to regulate the management of corporations and narrow the range of their action. The same remark applies, with even more force, to combinations of men not incorporated but acting together, the so-called Trusts, *i.e.* commercial rings, or syndicates. The next few years or even decades may be largely occupied with the effort to deal with these phenomena of a commercial system far more highly developed than the world has yet seen elsewhere. The economic advantages of the amalgamation of railroads and the

tendency in all departments of trade for large concerns to absorb or supplant small ones, are both so marked that problems of this order seem likely to grow even larger and more urgent than they now are. Their solution will demand, not only great legal skill, but great economic wisdom.

Of the tendency to aggregation there are happily few signs so far as relates to agriculture. The only great landed estates are in the Far West, particularly in California, where they are a relic from Spanish days, together with some properties held by land companies or individual speculators in the Upper Mississippi States, properties which are being generally sold in small farms to incoming settlers. The census returns of 1890 do no doubt show a slight increase in the number of persons who hire from others the lands they till. While the increase in the number of farms cultivated by the owner during the decade ending with that year was only 9.56 per cent, that of farms rented for money by the cultivator was 41.04 per cent, and that of farms rented for a share of the products 19.65 per cent. This may, however, be due partly to the growth of small negro farms in the South, partly to the disposition of many Western farmers to retire from active labour when old age approaches, letting their farms, and living on the rent thereof, partly also to the buying up of lands near a "boom town" by speculators for a rise. Taking the country as a whole, there is no indication of any serious change to large properties.¹ In the South, large plantations are more rare than before the war, and much of the cotton crop is raised by peasant farmers, as the increase in the number of farms returned in 1890 proves. It is of course possible that cultivation on a large scale may in some regions turn out to be more profitable than that of small freeholders: agriculture as an art may be still in its infancy, and science may alter the conditions of production in this highly inventive country. But at present nothing seems to threaten that system of small proprietors tilling the soil they live on which so greatly con-

¹ Of the 4,564,641 farms returned in the census of 1890, 3,269,728 are cultivated by the owner and 1,294,913 rented by the farmer; and of those owned little more than one-fourth would appear to be subject to mortgages. The proportion to the whole number of dwellings not owned but hired by those who live in them is, of course, very much larger, viz. 63 per cent for the whole country, and 76 per cent for the cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants.

tributes to the happiness and stability of the commonwealth. The motives which in Europe induce rich men to buy large estates are here wholly wanting, for no one gains either political power or social status by becoming a landlord.

Changes in economic conditions have begun to bring about changes in population which will work powerfully on the future of society and politics. One such change has been passing on New England during the last twenty years. Its comparatively thin and ungenial soil, which has generally hard rock at no great depth below the surface, and has been cultivated in many places for nigh two hundred years, is now unable to sustain the competition of the rich and virgin lands of the West. The old race of New England yeomen have accordingly begun to sell or abandon their farms and to migrate to the upper valley of the Mississippi, where they make the prosperity of the North-western States. The lands which they have left vacant are frequently occupied by immigrants, sometimes French Canadians, but chiefly Irish, for few Germans and Slavs come to New England; and thus that which was the most purely English part of America is now becoming one of the most Celtic, since the cities also are full of Irish and Canadians. In Massachusetts, for instance, the persons of foreign birth or parentage are already 56 per cent of the population, in Rhode Island 58 per cent. It is impossible not to regret the disappearance of a picturesquely primitive society which novelists and essayists have made familiar to us, with its delightful mixture of homely simplicity and keen intelligence. Of all the types of rustic life which imagination has since the days of Theocritus embellished for the envy or refreshment of the dwellers in cities, this latest type has been to modern Europe the most real and not the least attractive. It will soon have passed away; nor will the life of the robust sons of the Puritans in the North-western prairies, vast and bare and new, reproduce the idyllic quality of their old surroundings. But the Irish squatters on the forsaken farms rear their children under better conditions than those either of the American cities or of the island of their birth, and they are replenishing New England with a vigorous stock.

Another change may possibly be seen when in the course of a few decades immigration begins to turn towards a Southern

region, the far greater part of which has remained until now undeveloped. Western North Carolina, Northern Georgia and Alabama, and Eastern Tennessee possess enormous mineral deposits, only a few of which have yet begun to be worked. There are splendid forests; there is in many places a soil believed to be fertile, little of which has been brought under cultivation; while the climate is in general not too hot for white labour. It seems probable that when the vacant spaces of the North-west are no longer wide enough to receive the continued influx of settlers, these regions will become the seat of industries attracting and employing a vast population: and this population may in large measure come from the more crowded parts of the Northern States, carrying with it Northern habits and ideas which will quicken the progress of a backward part of the South, and bring her into a more perfect harmony with the rest of the country.

The mention of the South raises a group of questions, bearing on the future of the negro and the relations he will sustain to the whites, which need not be discussed here, as they have been dealt with in preceding chapters (Chapters XCII. and XCIII.). The alarm which the growth of the coloured people formerly excited was allayed by the census of 1890, which showed that they increase more slowly than the whites, even in the South, and form a constantly diminishing proportion of the total population of the country. The negro is doubtless a heavy burden for American civilization to carry. No problems seem likely so long to confront the nation, and so severely to tax the national character on its moral side, as those which his presence raises. Much patience will be needed, and much sympathy. The negro, however, is necessary to the South, for only he can till its hot and unhealthy lowlands; and his labour has proved helpful also to the mine-owners and iron-masters of the mining regions I have just referred to. His progress since emancipation has been more rapid than those who saw him in slavery expected, and gives ground for hope. So far from relapsing into sloth and barbarism, like his kinsfolk in most of the Antilles (where a few weeks' labour may provide food enough to support a family through the year), the negro has, especially in those districts where he is most in industrial contact with the whites, risen steadily in education, in intelli-