

CHAPTER V
THE AGE OF DISCUSSION

Part I

THE greatest living contrast is between the old Eastern and customary civilizations and the new Western and changeable civilizations. A year or two ago an inquiry was made of our most intelligent officers in the East, not as to whether the English Government were really doing good in the East, but as to whether the natives of India themselves thought we were doing good; to which, in a majority of cases, the officers who were the best authority, answered thus: "No doubt you are giving the Indians many great benefits: you give them continued peace, free trade, the right to live as they like, subject to the laws; in these points and others they are far better off than they ever were; but still they cannot make you out. What puzzles them is your constant disposition to change, or as you call it, improvement. Their own life in every detail being regulated by ancient usage, they cannot comprehend a policy which is always bringing something new; they do not a bit believe that the desire to make them comfortable and happy is the root of it; they believe, on the contrary, that you are aiming at something which they do not understand—that you mean to 'take away their religion;' in a word, that the end and object of all these continual changes is to make Indians not what they are and what they like to be, but something new and different from what they are, and what they would not like to be." In the East, in a word, we are attempting to put new wine into old bottles—to pour what we can of a civilization whose spirit is progress into the form of a civilization whose spirit is fixity, and whether we shall succeed or not is perhaps the most interesting question in an age abounding almost beyond example in questions of political interest.

Historical inquiries show that the feeling of the Hindoos is the old feeling, and that the feeling of the Englishman is a modern feeling. "Old law rests," as Sir Henry Maine puts it, "not on contract but on status." The life of ancient civilization, so far as legal records go, runs back to a time when every important particular of life was settled by a usage which was social, political, and religious, as we should now say, all in one—which those who obeyed it could not have been able to analyze, for those distinctions had no place in their mind and language, but which they felt to be a usage of imperishable import, and above all things to be kept unchanged. In former papers I have shown, or at least tried to show, why these customary civilizations were the only ones which suited an early society; why, so to say, they alone could have been first; in what manner they had in their very structure a decisive advantage over all competitors. But now comes the further question: If fixity is an invariable ingredient in early civilizations, how then did any civilization become unfixed? No doubt most civilizations stuck where they first were; no doubt we see now why stagnation is the rule of the world, and why progress is the very rare exception; but we do not learn what it is which has caused progress in these few cases, or the absence of what it is which has denied it in all others.

To this question history gives a very clear and very remarkable answer. It is that the change from the age of status to the age of choice was first made in states where the government was to a great and a growing extent a government by discussion, and where the subjects of that discussion were in some degree abstract, or, as we should say, matters of principle. It was in the small republics of Greece and Italy that the chain of custom was first broken. "Liberty said, Let there be light, and, like a sunrise on the sea, Athens arose," says Shelley, and his historical philosophy is in this case far more correct than is usual with him. A free state—a state with liberty—means a state, call it republic or call it monarchy, in which the sovereign power is divided between many persons, and in which there is a discussion among those persons. Of these the Greek republics were the first in history, if not in time, and Athens was the greatest of those republics.

After the event it is easy to see why the teaching of history

should be this and nothing else. It is easy to see why the common discussion of common actions or common interests should become the root of change and progress. In early society, originality in life was forbidden and repressed by the fixed rule of life. It may not have been quite so much so in ancient Greece as in some other parts of the world. But it was very much so even there. As a recent writer has well said, "Law then presented itself to men's minds as something venerable and unchangeable, as old as the city; it had been delivered by the founder himself, when he laid the walls of the city, and kindled its sacred fire." An ordinary man who wished to strike out a new path, to begin a new and important practice by himself, would have been peremptorily required to abandon his novelties on pain of death; he was deviating, he would be told, from the ordinances imposed by the gods on his nation, and he must not do so to please himself. On the contrary, others were deeply interested in his actions. If he disobeyed, the gods might inflict grievous harm on all the people as well as him. Each partner in the most ancient kind of partnerships was supposed to have the power of attracting the wrath of the divinities on the entire firm, upon the other partners quite as much as upon himself. The quaking bystanders in a superstitious age would soon have slain an isolated bold man in the beginning of his innovations. What Macaulay so relied on as the incessant source of progress—the desire of man to better his condition—was not then permitted to work; man was required to live as his ancestors had lived.

Still further away from those times were the "free thought" and the "advancing sciences" of which we now hear so much. The first and most natural subject upon which human thought concerns itself is religion; the first wish of the half-emancipated thinker is to use his reason on the great problems of human destiny—to find out whence he came and whither he goes, to form for himself the most reasonable idea of God which he can form. But, as Mr. Grote happily said—"This is usually what ancient times would not let a man do. His *gens* or his *φρατρια* required him to believe as they believed." Toleration is of all ideas the most modern, because the notion that the bad religion of A cannot impair, here or hereafter, the welfare of B, is, strange to say, a modern idea. And the help of "science,"

at that stage of thought, is still more nugatory. Physical science, as we conceive it—that is, the systematic investigation of external nature in detail—did not then exist. A few isolated observations on surface things—a half-correct calendar, secrets mainly of priestly invention, and in priestly custody—were all that was then imagined; the idea of using a settled study of nature as a basis for the discovery of new instruments and new things, did not then exist. It is indeed a modern idea, and is peculiar to a few European countries even yet. In the most intellectual city of the ancient world, in its most intellectual age, Socrates, its most intellectual inhabitant, discouraged the study of physics because they engendered uncertainty, and did not augment human happiness. The kind of knowledge which is most connected with human progress now was that least connected with it then.

But a government by discussion, if it can be borne, at once breaks down the yoke of fixed custom. The idea of the two is inconsistent. As far as it goes, the mere putting up of a subject to discussion, with the object of being guided by that discussion, is a clear admission that that subject is in no degree settled by established rule, and that men are free to choose in it. It is an admission too that there is no sacred authority—no one transcendent and divinely appointed man whom in that matter the community is bound to obey. And if a single subject or group of subjects be once admitted to discussion, ere long the habit of discussion comes to be established, the sacred charm of use and wont to be dissolved. "Democracy," it has been said in modern times, "is like the grave; it takes, but it does not give." The same is true of "discussion." Once effectually submit a subject to that ordeal, and you can never withdraw it again; you can never again clothe it with mystery, or fence it by consecration; it remains forever open to free choice, and exposed to profane deliberation.

The only subjects which can be first submitted, or which till a very late age of civilization can be submitted to discussion in the community, are the questions involving the visible and pressing interests of the community; they are political questions of high and urgent import. If a nation has in any considerable degree gained the habit, and exhibited the capacity, to discuss these questions with freedom, and to decide them

with discretion, to argue much on politics and not to argue ruinously, an enormous advance in other kinds of civilization may confidently be predicted for it. And the reason is a plain deduction from the principles which we have found to guide early civilization. The first pre-historic men were passionate savages, with the greatest difficulty coerced into order and compressed into a state. For ages were spent in beginning that order and founding that state; the only sufficient and effectual agent in so doing was consecrated custom; but then that custom gathered over everything, arrested all onward progress, and stayed the originality of mankind. If, therefore, a nation is able to gain the benefit of custom without the evil—if after ages of waiting it can have order and choice together—at once the fatal clog is removed, and the ordinary springs of progress, as in a modern community we conceive them, begin their elastic action.

Discussion, too, has incentives to progress peculiar to itself. It gives a premium to intelligence. To set out the arguments required to determine political action with such force and effect that they really should determine it, is a high and great exertion of intellect. Of course, all such arguments are produced under conditions; the argument abstractedly best is not necessarily the winning argument. Political discussion must move those who have to act; it must be framed in the ideas, and be consonant with the precedent, of its time, just as it must speak its language. But within these marked conditions good discussion is better than bad; no people can bear a government of discussion for a day, which does not, within the boundaries of its prejudices and its ideas, prefer good reasoning to bad reasoning, sound argument to unsound. A prize for argumentative mind is given in free states, to which no other states have anything to compare.

Tolerance too is learned in discussion, and, as history shows, is only so learned. In all customary societies bigotry is the ruling principle. In rude places to this day any one who says anything new is looked on with suspicion, and is persecuted by opinion if not injured by penalty. One of the greatest pains to human nature is the pain of a new idea. It is, as common people say, so "upsetting;" it makes you think that, after all, your favorite notions may be wrong, your firmest beliefs ill-

founded; it is certain that till now there was no place allotted in your mind to the new and startling inhabitant, and now that it has conquered an entrance, you do not at once see which of your old ideas it will or will not turn out, with which of them it can be reconciled, and with which it is at essential enmity. Naturally, therefore, common men hate a new idea, and are disposed more or less to ill-treat the original man who brings it. Even nations with long habits of discussion are intolerant enough. In England, where there is on the whole probably a freer discussion of a greater number of subjects than ever was before in the world, we know how much power bigotry retains. But discussion, to be successful, requires tolerance. It fails wherever, as in a French political assembly, any one who hears anything which he dislikes tries to howl it down. If we know that a nation is capable of enduring continuous discussion, we know that it is capable of practising with equanimity continuous tolerance.

The power of a government by discussion as an instrument of elevation plainly depends—other things being equal—on the greatness or littleness of the things to be discussed. There are periods when great ideas are "in the air," and when, from some cause or other, even common persons seem to partake of an unusual elevation. The age of Elizabeth in England was conspicuously such a time. The new idea of the Reformation in religion, and the enlargement of the *mania mundi* by the discovery of new and singular lands, taken together, gave an impulse to thought which few, if any, ages can equal. The discussion, though not wholly free, was yet far freer than in the average of ages and countries. Accordingly, every pursuit seemed to start forward. Poetry, science, and architecture, different as they are, and removed as they all are at first sight from such an influence as discussion, were suddenly started onward. Macaulay would have said you might rightly read the power of discussion "in the poetry of Shakespeare, in the prose of Bacon, in the oriels of Longleat, and the stately pinnacles of Burleigh." This is, in truth, but another case of the principle of which I have had occasion to say so much as to the character of ages and countries. If any particular power is much prized in an age, those possessed of that power will be imitated; those deficient in that power will be despised. In

consequence an unusual quantity of that power will be developed, and be conspicuous. Within certain limits vigorous and elevated thought was respected in Elizabeth's time, and, therefore, vigorous and elevated thinkers were many; and the effect went far beyond the cause: It penetrated into physical science, for which very few men cared; and it began a reform in philosophy to which almost all were then opposed. In a word, the temper of the age encouraged originality, and in consequence original men started into prominence, went hither and thither where they liked, arrived at goals which the age never expected, and so made it ever memorable.

In this manner all the great movements of thought in ancient and modern times have been nearly connected in time with government by discussion. Athens, Rome, the Italian republics of the Middle Ages, the communes and states-general of feudal Europe, have all had a special and peculiar quickening influence, which they owed to their freedom, and which states without that freedom have never communicated. And it has been at the time of great epochs of thought—at the Peloponnesian war, at the fall of the Roman Republic, at the Reformation, at the French Revolution—that such liberty of speaking and thinking have produced their full effect.

It is on this account that the discussions of savage tribes have produced so little effect in emancipating those tribes from their despotic customs. The oratory of the North American Indian—the first savage whose peculiarities fixed themselves in the public imagination—has become celebrated, and yet the North American Indians were scarcely, if at all, better orators than many other savages. Almost all of the savages who have melted away before the Englishman were better speakers than he is. But the oratory of the savages has led to nothing, and was likely to lead to nothing. It is a discussion not of principles, but of undertakings; its topics are whether expedition A will answer, and should be undertaken; whether expedition B will not answer, and should not be undertaken; whether village A is the best village to plunder, or whether village B is a better. Such discussions augment the vigor of language, encourage a debating facility, and develop those gifts of demeanor and of gesture which excite the confidence of the hearers. But they do not excite the speculative intellect, do not

lead men to argue speculative doctrines, or to question ancient principles. They, in some material respects, improve the sheep within the fold; but they do not help them or incline them to leap out of the fold.

The next question, therefore, is, Why did discussions in some cases relate to prolific ideas, and why did discussions in other cases relate only to isolated transactions? The reply which history suggests is very clear and very remarkable. Some races of men at our earliest knowledge of them have already acquired the basis of a free constitution; they have already the rudiments of a complex polity—a monarch, a senate, and a general meeting of citizens. The Greeks were one of those races, and it happened, as was natural, that there was in process of time a struggle, the earliest that we know of, between the aristocratical party, originally represented by the Senate, and the popular party, represented by the "general meeting." This is plainly a question of principle, and its being so has led to its history being written more than two thousand years afterwards in a very remarkable manner. Some seventy years ago an English country gentleman named Mitford, who, like so many of his age, had been terrified into aristocratic opinions by the first French Revolution, suddenly found that the history of the Peloponnesian War was the reflex of his own time. He took up his Thucydides, and there he saw, as in a mirror, the progress and the struggles of his age. It required some freshness of mind to see this; at least, it had been hidden for many centuries. All the modern histories of Greece before Mitford had but the vaguest idea of it; and not being a man of supreme originality, he would doubtless have had very little idea of it either, except that the analogy of what he saw helped him by a telling object-lesson to the understanding of what he read. Just as in every country of Europe in 1793 there were two factions, one of the old-world aristocracy, and the other of the incoming democracy, just so there was in every city of ancient Greece, in the year 400 B.C., one party of the many and another of the few. This Mr. Mitford perceived, and being a strong aristocrat, he wrote a "history," which is little except a party pamphlet, and which, it must be said, is even now readable on that very account. The vigor of passion with which it was written puts life into the words, and retains the attention of

