

## LOCAL TRADITION

Sir William Jones, in his noble poem, *What Constitutes a State*, negatively exhausts the subject of statehood; but there is one positive factor in the problem of commonwealth making which is scarcely more than suggested in the poet's splendid dream. True, "men, high-minded men," must ever constitute the main element of strength in a state; but the poet names only one—and that the least important—of the two influences which together affect men in the aggregate, namely: "Sovereign law, the State's elected will." The other influence, more potent than statutes, too subtle to be confined in a body of laws, too elusive to be found by index, is the spirit which broods over community life and, without show of force, compels the representatives of communities and of the commonwealth to do or withhold, to approve, to hold in abeyance, or to condemn.

For want of a better term, we call this elusive, subtle, intangible, yet potent influence "Tradition"—not in the ordinary sense in which that term is used, not in the sense in which the folk-lorist uses it, but more nearly with the meaning which Paul conveyed in his exhortation to the Thessalonians that they hold the traditions which they had been taught.

To illustrate. One community has a theological tradition with its accompanying virtues and possibly its narrowing tendencies. Another has broadened out beyond mere dogma and in the process has retained all its original respect

and regard for religion but may have dangerously lapsed in its judgments as to conduct. In one community temperance means total abstinence; in another, it means moderate use. One community is healthfully public-spirited, scattering and yet increasing; another is wildly public-spirited, and bankrupt; in another the motto is "get and keep," and yet the prevailing tendency is to want, and the getters and keepers groan over "poor expenses." One aggregation of individuals and communities, called a State, in its influence upon the nation is repressive. Its favorite maxim is "the world is governed too much." Another, separated from the first by only an imaginary line, bases its political philosophy upon the lessons taught by the confederacy of 1777-81, out of the confessed weakness of which grew the national idea. One State accords to women every political and legal right which men enjoy; another carries Paul's admonition still further and lets the women keep silence in state as well as church affairs. In one State the sale of intoxicants as beverages is prohibited, on the ground that the greatest good to the greatest number is thereby subserved. Just over the line in another State, the licensed sale of liquor is everywhere sanctioned, and every assault upon the license system is regarded as an attack upon personal liberty. In every case the laws would be powerless but for that same rarely mentioned but generally felt and recognized tradition from which there would seem to be, and in a single lifetime there generally is, no successful appeal. The term "public opinion," though often used as a substitute for it, is not synonymous, for public opinion is but the latest indicator of a trend which has its beginning far back in the past.

In every instance there is a starting point of character and habits in the first settlers. Rough in manner and crude in habits of thought as many of these pioneers were of necessity, their potent spell is upon us; the strongest among us feel it, and the wisest, after a brush of experience, cease fighting it. Though these "rude forefathers of the hamlet" lived and died in ignorance, or scorn, of the Socratic method of reasoning with all the comparatively modern improvements, and enjoyed a sublime confidence in those rational instincts which we call intuitions, though we may pronounce their vision short and its range narrow, yet the product of their aggregated individual experiences as crystallized into tradition is in many instances as irresistible as dialect, or climate.

Hegel well terms this spirit "the latent germ of being," "the capacity or potentiality, striving to realize itself;" "not of such a nature as to be tossed to and fro amid the superficial clay of accidents, but rather the absolute arbiter of things."

The German philosopher ranges history under three heads: original history, reflective history, and philosophical history. But the reflective and the philosophical are only two phases of history's aftergrowth. The philosophy of history, with all kindred thought, is the leafing and flowering of original history. The common source of all systems of social philosophy is fact, and history is fact with generalization drawn therefrom.

We do well to turn again and again to the history of the Jews, the Greeks, the Romans, the Dutch, the Germans, the French, the English. But we cannot unqualifiedly apply

old-world experiences to new-world conditions. The genius of old-world institutions, the trend of old-world traditions, the very germs of old-world community life, are unlike ours. The statesman's, the historian's, the journalist's parallel, if not "deadly," is at least misleading and mischievous, unless it be explained away so thoroughly as to be no parallel at all.

Every people, every age, must be measured by itself alone. The closest comparisons are at most but remote approximations. Speaking with literal truth, they are not comparisons at all. Like rival lines of railroad, their general direction and destination are the same, but they wind in and out and cross each other, one tunneling where another goes round or climbs.

The wise philosopher of history, or student of social science, will also differentiate one community, or one group of communities from another. In fact, at every turn of original investigation into the condition of society as he finds it, and of states as they present themselves ready-made for his inspection and study, the historiographer, or the sociologist, is forced to establish and all along the line maintain close and reliable connection with the original sources of history, just as an invading army must establish and maintain connection with its base of supplies.

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