

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE SELF-CONTAINED COMMUNITY

That groups of self-centered people would engage in a struggle for existence if they rubbed against each other has always been evident. This much truth there is at any rate in that famous passage in the Leviathan where Hobbes says that "though there had never been any time wherein particular men were in a condition of war one against another, yet at all times kings and *persons of sovereign authority because of their independency*, are in continual jealousies and in the state and posture of gladiators, having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another..."<sup>1</sup>

To circumvent this conclusion one great branch of human thought, which had and has many schools, proceeded in this fashion: it conceived an ideally just pattern of human relations in which each person had well defined functions and rights. If he conscientiously filled the role allotted to him, it did not matter whether his opinions were right or wrong. He did his duty, the next man did his, and all the dutiful people together made a harmonious world. Every caste system illustrates this principle; you find it in Plato's Republic and in Aristotle, in the feudal ideal, in the circles of Dante's Paradise, in the bureaucratic type of socialism, and in laissez-faire, to an amazing degree in syndicalism, guild socialism, anarchism, and in the system of international law idealized by Mr. Robert Lansing. All of them assume a pre-established harmony, inspired, imposed, or innate, by which the self-opinionated person, class, or community is orchestrated with the rest of mankind. The more authoritarian imagine a conductor for the symphony who sees to it that each man plays his part; the anarchistic are inclined to think that a more divine concord would be heard if each player improvised as he went along.

But there have also been philosophers who were bored by these schemes of rights and duties, took conflict for granted, and tried to see how their side might come out on top. They have always seemed more realistic, even when they seemed alarming, because all they had to do was to generalize the experience that nobody could escape. Machiavelli is the classic of this school, a man most mercilessly maligned, because he happened to be the first naturalist who used plain language in a field hitherto preempted by supernaturalists.<sup>2</sup> He has a worse name and more disciples than any political thinker who ever lived. He truly described the technic of existence for the self-contained state. That is why he has the disciples. He has the bad name chiefly because he cocked his eye at the Medici family, dreamed in his study at night where he wore his "noble court dress" that Machiavelli was himself the Prince, and turned a pungent description of the way things are done into an eulogy on that way of doing them.

In his most infamous chapter <sup>3</sup> he wrote that "a prince ought to take care that he never lets anything slip from his lips that is not replete with the above-named five qualities, that he may appear to him who hears and sees him altogether merciful, faithful, humane, upright, and religious. There is nothing more necessary to appear to have than this last quality, inasmuch as men judge generally more by the eye than by the hand, because it belongs to everybody to see you, to few to come in touch with you. Everyone sees what you appear to be, few really know what you are, and those few dare not oppose themselves to the opinion of the many, who have the majesty of the state to defend them; and in the actions of all men, and especially of princes, which it is not prudent to challenge, one judges by the result.... One prince of the present time, whom it is not well to name, never preaches anything else but peace and good faith, and to both he is most hostile, and either, if he had kept it, would have deprived him of reputation and kingdom many a time."

That is cynical. But it is the cynicism of a man who saw truly without knowing quite why he saw what he saw. Machiavelli is thinking of the run of men and princes "who judge generally more by the eye than by the hand," which is his way of saying that their judgments are subjective. He was too close to earth to pretend that the Italians of his day saw the world steadily and saw it whole. He would not indulge in fantasies, and he had not the materials for imagining a race of men that had learned how to correct their vision.

The world, as he found it, was composed of people whose vision could rarely be corrected, and Machiavelli knew that such people, since they see all public relations in a private way, are involved in perpetual strife. What they see is their own personal, class, dynastic, or municipal version of affairs that in reality extend far beyond the boundaries of their vision. They see their aspect. They see it as right. But they cross other people who are similarly self-centered. Then their very existence is endangered, or at least what they, for unsuspected private reasons, regard as their existence and take to be a danger. The end, which is impregnably based on a real though private experience justifies the means. They will sacrifice any one of these ideals to save all of them, . . . "one judges by the result . . ."

These elemental truths confronted the democratic philosophers. Consciously or otherwise, they knew that the range of political knowledge was limited, that the area of self-government would have to be limited, and that self-contained states when they rubbed against each other were in the posture of gladiators. But they knew just as certainly, that there was in men a will to decide their own fate, and to find a peace that was not imposed by force. How could they reconcile the wish and the fact? They looked about them. In the city states of Greece and Italy they found a chronicle of corruption, intrigue and war.<sup>4</sup> In their own cities they saw faction, artificiality, fever. This was no environment in which the democratic ideal could prosper, no place where a group of independent and equally competent people managed their own affairs spontaneously. They looked further, guided somewhat perhaps by Jean Jacques Rousseau, to remote, unspoiled country villages. They saw enough to convince themselves that there the ideal was at home. Jefferson in particular felt this, and Jefferson more than any other man formulated the American image of democracy. From the townships had come the power that had carried the American Revolution to victory. From the townships were to come the votes that carried Jefferson's party to power. Out there in the farming communities of Massachusetts and Virginia, if you wore glasses that obliterated the slaves, you could see with your mind's eye the image of what democracy was to be.

"The American Revolution broke out," says de Tocqueville,<sup>5</sup> "and the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people, which had been nurtured in the townships, took possession of the state." It certainly took possession of the minds of those men who formulated and popularized the stereotypes of democracy. "The cherishment of the people was our principle," wrote Jefferson.<sup>6</sup> But the people he cherished almost exclusively were the small landowning farmers: "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which He keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example."

However much of the romantic return to nature may have entered into this exclamation, there was also an element of solid sense. Jefferson was right in thinking that a group of independent farmers comes nearer to fulfilling the requirements of spontaneous democracy than any other human society. But if you are to preserve the ideal, you must fence off these ideal communities from the abominations of the world. If the farmers are to manage their own affairs, they must

confine affairs to those they are accustomed to managing. Jefferson drew all these logical conclusions. He disapproved of manufacture, of foreign commerce, and a navy, of intangible forms of property, and in theory of any form of government that was not centered in the small self-governing group. He had critics in his day: one of them remarked that "wrapt up in the fullness of self-consequence and strong enough, in reality, to defend ourselves against every invader, we might enjoy an eternal rusticity and live, forever, thus apathized and vulgar under the shelter of a selfish, satisfied indifference." [7](#)

The democratic ideal, as Jefferson moulded it, consisting of an ideal environment and a selected class, did not conflict with the political science of his time. It did conflict with the realities. And when the ideal was stated in absolute terms, partly through exuberance and partly for campaign purposes, it was soon forgotten that the theory was originally devised for very special conditions. It became the political gospel, and supplied the stereotypes through which Americans of all parties have looked at politics.

That gospel was fixed by the necessity that in Jefferson's time no one could have conceived public opinions that were not spontaneous and subjective. The democratic tradition is therefore always trying to see a world where people are exclusively concerned with affairs of which the causes and effects all operate within the region they inhabit. Never has democratic theory been able to conceive itself in the context of a wide and unpredictable environment. The mirror is concave. And although democrats recognize that they are in contact with external affairs, they see quite surely that every contact outside that self-contained group is a threat to democracy as originally conceived. That is a wise fear. If democracy is to be spontaneous, the interests of democracy must remain simple, intelligible, and easily managed. Conditions must approximate those of the isolated rural township if the supply of information is to be left to casual experience. The environment must be confined within the range of every man's direct and certain knowledge.

The democrat has understood what an analysis of public opinion seems to demonstrate: that in dealing with an unseen environment decisions "are manifestly settled at haphazard, which clearly they ought not to be." [8](#) So he has always tried in one way or another to minimize the importance of that unseen environment. He feared foreign trade because trade involves foreign connections; he distrusted manufactures because they produced big cities and collected crowds; if he had nevertheless to have manufactures, he wanted protection in the interest of self-sufficiency. When he could not find these conditions in the real world, he went passionately into the wilderness, and founded Utopian communities far from foreign contacts. His slogans reveal his prejudice. He is for Self-Government, Self-Determination, Independence. Not one of these ideas carries with it any notion of consent or community beyond the frontiers of the self-governing groups. The field of democratic action is a circumscribed area. Within protected boundaries the aim has been to achieve self-sufficiency and avoid entanglement. This rule is not confined to foreign policy, but it is plainly evident there, because life outside the national boundaries is more distinctly alien than any life within. And as history shows, democracies in their foreign policy have had generally to choose between splendid isolation and a diplomacy that violated their ideals. The most successful democracies, in fact, Switzerland, Denmark, Australia, New Zealand, and America until recently, have had no foreign policy in the European sense of that phrase. Even a rule like the Monroe Doctrine arose from the desire to supplement the two oceans by a glacis of states that were sufficiently republican to have no foreign policy.

Whereas danger is a great, perhaps an indispensable condition of autocracy, [9](#) security was seen to be a necessity if democracy was to work. There must be as little disturbance as possible of the premise of a self-contained community. Insecurity involves surprises. It means that there are people acting upon your life,

over whom you have no control, with whom you cannot consult. It means that forces are at large which disturb the familiar routine, and present novel problems about which quick and unusual decisions are required. Every democrat feels in his bones that dangerous crises are incompatible with democracy, because he knows that the inertia of masses is such that to act quickly a very few must decide and the rest follow rather blindly. This has not made non-resistants out of democrats, but it has resulted in all democratic wars being fought for pacifist aims. Even when the wars are in fact wars of conquest, they are sincerely believed to be wars in defense of civilization.

These various attempts to enclose a part of the earth's surface were not inspired by cowardice, apathy, or, what one of Jefferson's critics called a willingness to live under monkish discipline. The democrats had caught sight of a dazzling possibility, that every human being should rise to his full stature, freed from man-made limitations. With what they knew of the art of government, they could, no more than Aristotle before them, conceive a society of autonomous individuals, except an enclosed and simple one. They could, then, select no other premise if they were to reach the conclusion that all the people could spontaneously manage their public affairs.

Having adopted the premise because it was necessary to their keenest hope, they drew other conclusions as well. Since in order to have spontaneous self-government, you had to have a simple self-contained community, they took it for granted that one man was as competent as the next to manage these simple and self-contained affairs. Where the wish is father to the thought such logic is convincing. Moreover, the doctrine of the omniscient citizen is for most practical purposes true in the rural township. Everybody in a village sooner or later tries his hand at everything the village does. There is rotation in office by men who are jacks of all trades. There was no serious trouble with the doctrine of the omniscient citizen until the democratic stereotype was universally applied, so that men looked at a complicated civilization and saw an enclosed village.

Not only was the individual citizen fitted to deal with all public affairs, but he was consistently public-spirited and endowed with unflinching interest. He was public-spirited enough in the township, where he knew everybody and was interested in everybody's business. The idea of enough for the township turned easily into the idea of enough for any purpose, for as we have noted, quantitative thinking does not suit a stereotype. But there was another turn to the circle. Since everybody was assumed to be interested enough in important affairs, only those affairs came to seem important in which everybody was interested.

This meant that men formed their picture of the world outside from the unchallenged pictures in their heads. These pictures came to them well stereotyped by their parents and teachers, and were little corrected by their own experience. Only a few men had affairs that took them across state lines. Even fewer had reason to go abroad. Most voters lived their whole lives in one environment, and with nothing but a few feeble newspapers, some pamphlets, political speeches, their religious training, and rumor to go on, they had to conceive that larger environment of commerce and finance, of war and peace. The number of public opinions based on any objective report was very small in proportion to those based on casual fancy.

And so for many different reasons, self-sufficiency was a spiritual ideal in the formative period. The physical isolation of the township, the loneliness of the pioneer, the theory of democracy, the Protestant tradition, and the limitations of political science all converged to make men believe that out of their own consciences they must extricate political wisdom. It is not strange that the deduction of laws from absolute principles should have usurped so much of their free energy. The American political mind had to live on its capital. In legalism it found

a tested body of rules from which new rules could be spun without the labor of earning new truths from experience. The formulae became so curiously sacred that every good foreign observer has been amazed at the contrast between the dynamic practical energy of the American people and the static theorism of their public life. That steadfast love of fixed principles was simply the only way known of achieving self-sufficiency. But it meant that the public opinions of any one community about the outer world consisted chiefly of a few stereotyped images arranged in a pattern deduced from their legal and their moral codes, and animated by the feeling aroused by local experiences.

Thus democratic theory, starting from its fine vision of ultimate human dignity, was forced by lack of the instruments of knowledge for reporting its environment, to fall back upon the wisdom and experience which happened to have accumulated in the voter. God had, in the words of Jefferson, made men's breasts "His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." These chosen people in their self-contained environment had all the facts before them. The environment was so familiar that one could take it for granted that men were talking about substantially the same things. The only real disagreements, therefore, would be in judgments about the same facts. There was no need to guarantee the sources of information. They were obvious, and equally accessible to all men. Nor was there need to trouble about the ultimate criteria. In the self-contained community one could assume, or at least did assume, a homogeneous code of morals. The only place, therefore, for differences of opinion was in the logical application of accepted standards to accepted facts. And since the reasoning faculty was also well standardized, an error in reasoning would be quickly exposed in a free discussion. It followed that truth could be obtained by liberty within these limits. The community could take its supply of information for granted; its codes it passed on through school, church, and family, and the power to draw deductions from a premise, rather than the ability to find the premise, was regarded as the chief end of intellectual training.

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1: Leviathan\_, Ch. XIII. Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as concerning their Felicity and Misery.

3: *The Prince*, Ch. XVIII. "Concerning the way in which Princes should keep faith." Translation by W. K. Marriott. 4: *Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention... and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.* Madison, *Federalist*, No. 10.

5: *Democracy in America*, Vol. I, p. 51. Third Edition

6: Cited in Charles Beard, *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy*. Ch. XIV.

7: *Op. cit.*, p. 426.

8: Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. VII, Ch. IV.

9: Fisher Ames, frightened by the democratic revolution of 1800, wrote to Rufus King in 1802: "We need, as all nations do, the compression on the outside of our circle of a formidable neighbor, whose presence shall at all times excite stronger fears than demagogues can inspire the people with towards their government." Cited by Ford, *Rise and Growth of American Politics*, p. 69.