

## Chapter XX.

### A NEW IMAGE

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THE lesson is, I think, a fairly clear one. In the absence of institutions and education by which the environment is so successfully reported that the realities of public life stand out sharply against self-centered opinion, the common interests very largely elude public opinion entirely, and can be managed only by a specialized class whose personal interests reach beyond the locality. This class is irresponsible, for it acts upon information that is not common property, in situations that the public at large does not conceive, and it can be held to account only on the accomplished fact.

The democratic theory by failing to admit that self-centered opinions are not sufficient to procure good government, is involved in perpetual conflict between theory and practice. According to the theory, the full dignity of man requires that his will should be, as Mr. Cole says, expressed "in any and every form of social action." It is supposed that the expression of their will is the consuming passion of men, for they are assumed to possess by instinct the art of government. But as a matter of plain experience, self-determination is only one of the many interests of a human personality. The desire to be the master of one's own destiny is a strong desire, but it has to adjust itself to other equally strong desires, such as the desire for a good life, for peace, for relief from burdens. In the original assumptions of democracy it was held that the expression of each man's will would spontaneously satisfy not only his desire for self-expression, but his desire for a good life, because the instinct to express one's self in a good life was innate.

The emphasis, therefore, has always been on the mechanism for expressing the will. The democratic El Dorado has always been some perfect environment, and some perfect system of voting and representation, where the innate good will and instinctive statesmanship of every man could be translated into action. In limited areas and for brief periods the environment has been so favorable, that is to say so isolated, and so rich in opportunity, that the theory worked well enough to confirm men in thinking that it was sound for all time and everywhere. Then when the isolation ended, and society became complex, and men had to adjust themselves closely to one another, the democrat spent his time trying to devise more perfect units of voting, in the hope that somehow he would, as Mr. Cole says, "get the mechanism right, and adjust it as far as possible to men's social wills." But while the democratic theorist was busy at this, he was far away from the actual interests of human nature. He was absorbed by one interest: self-government. Mankind was interested in all kinds of other things, in order, in its rights, in prosperity, in sights and sounds and in not being bored. In so far as spontaneous democracy does not satisfy their other interests, it seems to most men most of the time to be an empty thing. Because the art of successful self-government is not instinctive, men do not long desire self-government for its own sake. They desire it for the sake of the results. That is why the impulse to self-government is always strongest as a protest against bad conditions.

The democratic fallacy has been its preoccupation with the origin of government rather than with the processes and results. The democrat has always assumed that if political power could be derived in the right way, it would be beneficent. His whole attention has been on the source of power, since he is hypnotized by the belief that

the great thing is to express the will of the people, first because expression is the highest interest of man, and second because the will is instinctively good. But no amount of regulation at the source of a river will completely control its behavior, and while democrats have been absorbed in trying to find a good mechanism for originating social power, that is to say a good mechanism of voting and representation, they neglected almost every other interest of men. For no matter how power originates, the crucial interest is in how power is exercised. What determines the quality of civilization is the use made of power. And that use cannot be controlled at the source.

If you try to control government wholly at the source, you inevitably make all the vital decisions invisible. For since there is no instinct which automatically makes political decisions that produce a good life, the men who actually exercise power not only fail to express the will of the people, because on most questions no will exists, but they exercise power according to opinions which are hidden from the electorate.

If, then, you root out of the democratic philosophy the whole assumption in all its ramifications that government is instinctive, and that therefore it can be managed by self-centered opinions, what becomes of the democratic faith in the dignity of man? It takes a fresh lease of life by associating itself with the whole personality instead of with a meager aspect of it. For the traditional democrat risked the dignity of man on one very precarious assumption, that he would exhibit that dignity instinctively in wise laws and good government. Voters did not do that, and so the democrat was forever being made to look a little silly by tough-minded men. But if, instead of hanging human dignity on the one assumption about self-government, you insist that man's dignity requires a standard of living, in which his capacities are properly exercised, the whole problem changes. The criteria which you then apply to government are whether it is producing a certain minimum of health, of decent housing, of material necessities, of education, of freedom, of pleasures, of beauty, not simply whether at the sacrifice of all these things, it vibrates to the self-centered opinions that happen to be floating around in men's minds. In the degree to which these criteria can be made exact and objective, political decision, which is inevitably the concern of comparatively few people, is actually brought into relation with the interests of men.

There is no prospect, in any time which we can conceive, that the whole invisible environment will be so clear to all men that they will spontaneously arrive at sound public opinions on the whole business of government. And even if there were a prospect, it is extremely doubtful whether many of us would wish to be bothered, or would take the time to form an opinion on "any and every form of social action" which affects us. The only prospect which is not visionary is that each of us in his own sphere will act more and more on a realistic picture of the invisible world, and that we shall develop more and more men who are expert in keeping these pictures realistic. Outside the rather narrow range of our own possible attention, social control depends upon devising standards of living and methods of audit by which the acts of public officials and industrial directors are measured. We cannot ourselves inspire or guide all these acts, as the mystical democrat has always imagined. But we can steadily increase our real control over these acts by insisting that all of them shall be plainly recorded, and their results objectively measured. I should say, perhaps, that we can progressively hope to insist. For the working out of such standards and of such audits has only begun.