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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PROBLEM OF PROGRESS AND DECLINE¹

By Dr. JOHN R. SWANTON

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THE privilege of delivering this address comes to me in the midst of intensive work in fields somewhat removed from the ordinary domain of anthropology, and that is why I have to offer you merely "some thoughts" on a great subject instead of the carefully formulated presentation which it should properly demand. Much of what I have to say will fall in the realm of general theory rather than that of science proper, and this must be my excuse for seeming to intrude into the territories of other disciplines. It would be more than presumptuous in me to do this if the question at issue concerned matters of fact, but it is otherwise when deductions are made from facts which transcend the boundaries

of science as ordinarily conceived, and may become bases for attitudes in the world at large affecting the lives of thousands of human beings.

First, I wish to say a word about that naive materialism which was more in vogue perhaps before the birth of the new physics than it is to-day. There is still a popular illusion that because science teaches that a physico-chemical world was necessary before organisms could exist upon it, and because paleontology has demonstrated that organisms have appeared successively in more and more complicated forms, therefore the organic came *in toto* out of the inorganic, and each succeeding level of organic life *in toto* out of the preceding one. Now, the observations of succession and relation are scientific; the deductions as to origin are philosophic. Yet superficial thinkers shift from one

¹ Address of the Vice-president and Chairman for Anthropology, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Richmond, December 29, 1938.

to the other without appearing to realize that they have made a fundamental change and an unprovable deduction. Although widely attributed to science and made the basis for that trite remark, "the materialism of science," this deduction never has been a part of science. Nevertheless, astronomers who insist on treating organic life as a rare phenomenon contribute to the error because life is made to appear as an abnormal intruder into the universe, when, in fact, the argument is entirely inferential, based on the assumption that life can exist under no other conditions than those which limit it on a single planet. Of course the anthropologist may have the last word, while granting all that the inorganicist demands, because he may claim the inorganicist himself. The latter may look out into a cosmos seemingly devoid of life phenomena, but the anthropologist can remind him that the observer himself is it, and that he views the heavens through instruments created by such organisms, that his sensory organs and nervous system belong to one, and that what he sees and the deductions he draws are all conditioned by the past history of his race and of his science, by his training and by his personal beliefs and prejudices.

When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt.

The anthropologist may, therefore, obtain some final compensation for being regarded as a somewhat crude interloper into the well-beformulated preserves of the "exact" sciences. In the last act he can claim them all. I am indulging in this philosophic prelude, however, without any such grandiose object in view but merely as a kind of anthropological declaration of independence.

If I seem to detect a philosophical slip on the part of inorganicists in insisting upon the priority of the objects of their study, I believe I detect another in their treatment of cosmic history. As far back as I can remember, and with almost complete unanimity, they have saddened my mind and disturbed my digestion with the spectacle of a running-down universe. To be sure, the general foreclosure is placed at a rather comfortable distance ahead and the new physics has granted very extensive reprieves, even if not a wholly new deal, but apparently not all inorganicists are willing to put the skeleton entirely back into the closet. They will suggest, like Eddington, that there is a monster on our trail known as the second law of thermodynamics which there is no way of shaking off, and that the universe with us poor mortals on its back is running down a blind alley where the monster will certainly corner us and dispose of us at last by a general freeze, unless some star comes along beforehand and gives us the merciful alternative of death by cremation.

But however scientifically justified the "heat-death"

concept may be, it is philosophically unsound as a *total* explanation. This is no cavalier assertion of mine. It was demonstrated by Professor Josiah Royce, of Harvard, for instance, long ago, though the special form of the theory in his time was somewhat different from that current to-day. Any one wishing to examine his argument at length will find it in Chapter X of his "Spirit of Modern Philosophy." But, in brief, we can not imagine ourselves to be existing in a fragment of finite time balanced between an infinite period of running-down and an infinite period of stagnation consequent upon the diffusion of energy. If the period of approach were infinite, it would have no end. If the period of stagnation were infinite, how could it have a beginning? We must either suppose we are looking out upon a one-way street and somewhere there is another one-way street carrying celestial traffic in the other direction or such phenomena are tidal and the present ebb will be followed by a flow.

At first sight the biologists seem to be more encouraging than the inorganicists, for organic evolution suggests progress and even as dour a member of the guild as Hooton talks hopefully of it as a movement "up from the ape"—parasitic forms of course excepted. But the eugenists, and Professor Hooton along with them, soon shatter our self-complacency again and plunge us back into the slough of despond, for it seems that the biological advance which our animal and early human ancestors attained is being thrown to the dogs—or even farther—by the perverse refusal of scientists and members of other superior classes—if there are any others—to reproduce their kind. The only point on which they leave us in the dark is as to how many of them are to perform this genetic miracle on the prevailing incomes.

But here again I seem to find flaws in the argument. We are led to believe that there is danger that we shall be overwhelmed with morons on account of the selfishness of the better classes and the recklessness of the worse ones in the matter of reproduction, and because natural selection and the survival of the fittest have been interfered with. But by the same token we must assume that natural selection has done its full duty by our animal relatives, the anthropoids. Yet, after half a million years or so the biologically virtuous anthropoids are on the verge of extinction, while mankind, though he has tampered with his environment in the most shameless manner, has managed to spread over almost all the globe. In the face of this fact, however, we are told that human generation like the universe at large is on the down grade and there is no salvation except in sterilization and in selective birth-promotion, genetic devolution being irreversible. We seem, indeed, to have here a kind of biological Calvinism, a new doctrine of total depravity.

But does it not seem incredible that the relatively

small number of our first human ancestors—highly selected, it is presumed, up to the fatal moment of becoming human—could have brought with them across from the animal world such multitudes of germinal defects? And if they did not, certain defects must have been acquired since that time, they are, *ipso facto*, not original or immutable, and there seems to be no good reason to suppose they are beyond treatment. While conceding that some genetic strains may be so far gone in depravity that they had best be eliminated, I can not therefore deny myself the hope that defects of others are curable. There is no surer way to fail than to postulate failure. "It can't be done" in the mouths of people is often the only reason why it hasn't been done.

There is a great deal to be said for eugenic theory, as I think all anthropologists will admit, but it has been made the starting point for all sorts of fantastic attempts at race betterment and genetic determination as far removed from scientific sanity as can well be imagined. In particular, there is a variety of eugenism abroad which not only believes in regulating human generation but believes it possesses the wisdom to do so above all scientists and that virtue consists in the production of human beings of a particular racial type, Nordic or Mediterranean or some other of supposed superior quality.

As has been repeatedly pointed out, there is no historical or biological justification for such a dogma, and hybridization, when not too wide or involving a psychological shock, seems to have proved of more advantage to mankind than the production of purer strains, while those peoples who gave birth to the higher cultures were very diverse. If we contemplate the six or seven centers from which civilization appears to have sprung, we find that the Egyptians, Cretans and probably the people of the Indus valley were dolichocephalic as well as the Semitic element in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, but that the Hurrians, Sumerians, Chinese and Maya were prevaillingly brachycephalic, both types occurring in Peru. It is significant furthermore that all these pioneers in the civilizing process belonged to the swarthy races. If Negroes are not represented among them, neither are Nordics, and both are probably absent for the same reason, because they are side-branches of the human family and removed farther from the primary cultural centers. Or are the extreme blacks and the extreme whites both inferior to the rest?

Language is, of course, a cultural feature, but it is one of the more persistent features and is often popularly confounded with race in discussions of racial differences, superiorities and inferiorities. Now, in the culture centers just enumerated, aside from the language of the Cretans, the exact nature of which is unknown, the languages spoken—Egyptian, Semitic, Dravidian, Chinese, Maya, Quechua and Yunca—are,

with the possible exception of the first two, totally unrelated and differ completely in structure. Thus both in physical type and in language the peoples who made the earliest cultural advances in both the Old and the New Worlds were diverse, and it may be added that peoples more closely related to each in both particulars remained on a lower level.

Since a dense population seems to be demanded by modern dictators as an adjunct to an aggressive policy, it may be noted that two centers, China and India, have such enormous populations without any aggressive policy to motivate them, and that the centers farther west which developed such a policy, notably those in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, lost. In the New World, Peru, which had a dense population for this continent, did develop an aggressive policy, but the Maya did not. On the other hand, we have numerous cases of aggressive empires, such as those of the Arabs, Romans, Huns and Mongols, which ultimately lost rather than gained.

The relation of civilization to various forms of government is especially pertinent. Offhand one would say that a stable government which gathers under itself all related people in a particular area would be more likely to advance in civilization and to advance civilization than a weak government and divided authority. This expectation is in some measure realized. The Victorian Age in England was one of great intellectual activity and productivity, and so were that of Louis XIV in France, the late sixteenth century in Spain and the Augustan Age in Rome. But, strikingly in contrast in every particular, are Greece of the fifth century B.C., Italy of the Renaissance, the Low Countries in the early seventeenth century and Germany in the age of Goethe and Schiller. Thus the highest spots in intellectual productivity until very recent times have been reached in countries divided into small competing states.

This is not to deny that governments are able to contribute to cultural advance but to point out their limitations. We are here brought face to face with the question of regimentation, to what extent and in what directions it is of value. For regimentation of some sort there is certain to be as long as men are brought together in societies and attempt collective activities. One type of regimentation which is now being very much discussed is, indeed, as old as human society. It is the kind of regimentation which lays upon each member of the group the duty of supplying food, clothing and shelter to all. Most primitive communities are mutual insurance companies and very effective ones. The food-gatherers of the group, using the term food-gatherers in its broadest sense, are not permitted to monopolize the products of their industry and drive bargains for their surplus with other members of the community. Distribution of food is

expected and enforced. This might be thought the occasion for an unhealthy crop of drones, and many do exist, but it is doubtful whether the proportion is any greater than in European society. Group opinion is everywhere the most powerful deterrent to dissenters, and members of the relatively small groups of which primitive societies consist are past masters of the art of making non-conformists miserable. The successful hunter will not raise his social status by cornering the food market and by "holding up" other members of the tribe in times of scarcity, but through the credit he receives as the savior of the town. Competition in the monopolization of values does not exist, but instead emulation in the performance of services. This does not mean that individuals in primitive societies are better or more unselfish than those in our own, merely that conditions have enforced upon them the desirability of mutual insurance for the basal needs. Our own society is often obliged to perform these same services, though usually in indirect ways, and we are not able to bring the same social pressure to bear effectively on all hoarders alike.

A regimentation like this which has for its object the care of the underprivileged is, thus, one of respectable antiquity and current utility. It needs no apology. The regimentation which we observe to-day under dictatorial governments, while performing this function incidentally, is of a very different type and motivated to different ends. The primitive societies of which I have been speaking are governed by a body of custom. They are governments by law instead of men, and while demanding the observance of certain taboos which to us often seem absurd, do not interfere beyond them in the private lives of their members. Within those limits the independence of the individual and the family is powerfully and stubbornly maintained. Moreover, and this is a matter to be particularly noted, their main concern is with the internal well-being of the community, not with its external policy.

The modern regimented state, on the other hand, is a government of men rather than laws, and, what is worse, it is a government in which foreign policy is a major interest and the military motive a primary concern. The dictator knows well that there are no motives as strong as fear and hate to induce masses of people to submit to regimentation, for such feelings support armies, and military life calls for just that kind of government. Therefore, a bogey is needed to hold constantly before the minds of the people, and this, though it may be furnished by a capitalist or communist class or party, or a religious group, is most successfully met by a foreign country. Frighten people sufficiently by telling them what outrages such a nation intends to perform upon them, and persuade them that their only hope is in absolute unity and "prepared-

ness," and you have them in a mood to submit to all demands and ready to mob any one whom you designate as sympathetic with the "enemy." When people are thoroughly frightened or angry they lose their self-control and their willingness to exercise it. But of course the stimulus has to be supplied repeatedly in order to keep the desired emotions alive, discordant notes might destroy the effect, and so there must be no opposition press, no dissenting voices. The cult of fear and hatred must be blown up regularly. The least wavering must be labeled as the work of the chosen devil or group of devils. Everything contrary to the dictatorial superstitions is occasioned by "a fiendish conspiracy," and so on. Of course, the wise among the dictators must realize that these constant applications of the shudder complex can not go on indefinitely. The slogans which at first excited fear and wrath begin to grow stale. They are presently repeated mechanically, with the tongue farther and farther into the cheek, become objects first of covert and finally of open jest, and the end of the régime is in sight unless the prejudice-pump can be reprimed with a foreign war. War itself is not desired. Threat of war is useful because it keeps regimentation alive, but war might wreck the entire structure. It is, therefore, only a last resort.

In the meantime, however, the hysteria on which dictatorships thrive has done great damage to civilization. The recurrent image-breaking in which works of art and beautiful buildings have perished, although the fury which occasioned it has in many cases been due to real abuses and sometimes accompanied ethical reform, has made the world poorer none the less. These emotional upheavals have not, of course, always been associated with dictatorships, but dictatorships make willing use of them. The burning and proscription of books with which the party in power happens to disagree, and in which modern dictators are bedfellows with the Chinese emperor who built the Great Wall, with the Caliph Omar and with many religious sectarians, represents another loss. How great would have been our heritage—how much greater than it is—if the good things of one culture had been preserved by the next and only the abuses discarded, instead of having good and bad alike exposed to the destructive outbursts of fanatic frenzy which have periodically disgraced and debased mankind!

While much of this destruction has been wrought by mobs armed with nothing more than sticks and stones and hatred, the greatest losses have been due directly or indirectly to the maintenance of the institution we call war. I have already spoken of war, or rather the threat of war, as the chief weapon in the armory of a dictator. War does not settle, but instead postpones the settlement of, questions which must finally be solved by general consent and sometimes by the working of

natural laws. Violence we may always expect, but it is one thing to deal with violence breaking out against the law and quite another to create deliberately war machines which are symbols of violence and therefore weapons for the perpetration of irrational acts. I am not an advocate of passive resistance in the face of aggression, but that does not prevent me from regarding the entire war institution, as such, as a total loss to humanity. It is, I am aware, considered by some an instrument for the advancement of mankind. I shall be prepared to accept that belief when it is shown that cancer has a perfecting influence on the human organism and that fleas evolve the dog.

Great as is the damage done by dictatorships in keeping the war spirit alive for political and personal ends, it is nothing beside the damage from their interference with the individual and family life within their borders. Let us consider the family life for a moment. Normally, human beings desire such a life, but a healthy domestic life is possible only under certain conditions. Those of us who are descended from old colonial houses, in which the number of offspring sometimes ran to ten or twenty to the family, have been wont to imagine those as the good old patriarchal days when each man's "quiver" was full of sons and daughters, and if he did not sit under his own vine and fig tree it was due to climatic rather than economic considerations. But geneticists who have probed into the idyllic homes of our ancestors have found that the extent of unoccupied land and the communal character of the farming life of the period made children an asset, and that to bring many of these families into existence exacted the lives of several mothers. It does not follow that a family life even as limitedly satisfactory as that could be built up in a highly industrialized community. How even the supposed advantage of a numerous family may be abused under somewhat analogous conditions was brought vividly to my attention in one of the more backward parts of our country. There I learned that it was the practice of farm owners to rent land by preference to families with large numbers of children so that there would be more unpaid labor available, and it was intimated that parents increased the numbers of their children with an eye to this tendency. Whatever immediate advantage the farm owner and the parents may have derived from such exploitation of childhood, it could only be damaging to the community as a whole, and probably made problems for society to face at a later day.

If the sexes were precisely even numerically and all individuals married, and all the children grew up to have offspring in their turn, each family must then have one son and one daughter on an average merely to renew the population of the globe. We know, of course, that that condition never has occurred, nor will

it ever occur. The wastage of life is such, coupled with voluntary and involuntary celibacy, that families that reproduce might perhaps average from four to six children in order to keep the population normal. If you review in your minds how many families of your acquaintance have from four to six children and how much time and care the proper rearing of children demands—those of you who have had experience with them—you will shed no tears over the cries of distress from so-called overpopulated countries "in need of more territory," especially when it is remembered that those states which wail most bitterly are the ones which subsidize childbirth and put a ban on family limitation. Mass production of infants can be intended only to aggrandize the power of a state and fill the ranks of its armies.

It is doubtful, however, whether such high-pressure methods of creating potential cannon-fodder will succeed. It is rather probable that this will prove another case of the sacrifice of quality to quantity. In spite of the failures of so many families, no device has yet been found for the raising of more efficient children apart from family control and guidance. It is probable that each family has an optimum level for the rearing of offspring, some functioning best with one, some with two and some with several, and some families performing their greatest uses to society without offspring. It is not a question of economic but of psychological and affectional adequacy. If government simply removes the environmental limitations to the proper functioning of a family, well and good, but when it goes beyond that it may overburden efficient parents and bribe inefficient parents to bring children into the world for which they can not care. The natural result of this state of affairs will be adoption of child-rearing by the state itself more and more, a custom also resorted to to protect the rising generation from "political heresy."

In assuming this attitude the state pretends that it has the higher good of its people at heart, but, in destroying the optimum family balance and breaking into the normal family life, it goes far toward destroying family happiness, and for this in the case of the ordinary citizen there can be no substitute, however successful the state as a whole may appear to be. A happy family life can not be harmonized with a life in which the parents are reduced to the status of studs. It is probable, furthermore, that the state will sacrifice in the long run the very advantage which it sought. You can not interfere with the delicate structure of family life and parental affection and raise men and women to be cogs in a machine without endangering their utility for anything else. And the ultimate successes of nations are due, not to the adjustment of parts to a predetermined pattern but to the ability of its citizenry to meet successfully conditions which are unprovided

for and unforeseen. A dictatorship which would endure must raise a new dictator, and the history of absolutism shows that no way has yet been found to select a succession of absolute monarchs guaranteed to maintain the level of the founder of the line.

You are all aware of the damage science has suffered in the highly regimented states. Every student in the realm of natural science would be justly indignant if he were told what deductions he must draw from his experiments before he began them, but over great areas of the world workers in the social sciences are, in effect, admonished in just this manner. Scholarship withers wherever and whenever it must subscribe in advance to a political, social or economic superstition. You are brought together here by the pursuit of truth, not to validate *Das Kapital* or *Mein Kampf*, and if you sacrifice the untrammelled pursuit of truth in one line of endeavor for a prescribed conclusion, there is the strongest likelihood that the perversion will spread to other disciplines and contaminate them all. Paradoxically, but not for the first time, only the martyrs will survive.

But fortunately, prejudice is a hothouse plant withered by the first breath of air from the great outdoors of truth. The cosmos is one and the world of mankind at heart is international. Interruption of the free flow of thought and the free flow of trade from nation to nation, mutual enmity, armaments, restrictive tariffs and monopolies damage most in the long run those responsible for them, and sooner or later they are doomed to pass away. In spite of the efforts of political, social or clerical groups to coerce the spirit of man, it has shown in all ages the capacity to resist and to reassert its freedom. To those emotional insanities which have for their object the curtailment of human liberty it has opposed the grander movements of the soul such as the social and ethical uplift which came with Christianity, the great revolutions of the eighteenth century and the emergence of the scientific approach. The morale which carried through those achievements was due to the fact that participants in them had a vision of truth and justice beyond that prevailing in the world about them, and a sense, too, that evolution and the course of history are, or can be made

to be, upward processes. This is one reason why I object to that superficial materialism which would give mind a place secondary to matter, and why I refuse to regard the "heat-death" hypothesis as the last word in cosmic theory. The persistent climb of life up the evolutionary ladder, and, in spite of his numerous lapses, of mankind up the cultural ladder lead me to believe that decline is temporary and progress normal.

And now for one ultimate question. We may assume that evolution among the organisms below man was unconscious, but that is not true, not altogether true at least, of cultural advance. Why do we aspire? Why do we scientists pursue truth? Is it for the gratification of our curiosity? Or the mere interest of the quest, like the resolution of a crossword puzzle? Or is it for the material benefit of mankind, ourselves included? While all these play a part, I am inclined to think our feeling comes to be simply that it is good to penetrate more and more deeply beneath the veil of appearances and the veil of prejudice and orient ourselves more and more to the profounder realities.

The conscious attitude of some of you is no doubt essentially humanistic. You are engaged in congenial work in pleasant surroundings and among appreciative associates. Like Thoreau you are willing to waive questions of the hereafter with the thought, "One world at a time." You are willing to trust your immortality in the hands of the scholars who may come after you and let such good work as you do benefit future generations upon this material world without disturbing yourselves as to another. There are some, however, and I am numbered among them, who, while they may be satisfied sufficiently with their own immediate surroundings, are unwilling to contemplate as the entire story the fates which seem to have been allotted undeservedly to many about them. They would like to regard themselves as inhabitants of a cosmos which, after all, and in the final summing up, is just, and, what is another way of saying the same thing, they would like to feel that this enterprise of life upon which we have been embarked without any volition on our part, is a worth-while process. They would like to think of it as something more than an endless procession of life out of and into the dark.

OBITUARY

EDMUND BEECHER WILSON
1856-1939

It is given to few men to exert so great an influence in their chosen field of scientific research and also to attract so many friends over a much wider range of interest. The beauty of Wilson's workmanship and the balanced judgments of his decisions are two of his outstanding accomplishments. In the discussions of

the broader aspects of the problems, connected with his researches, his careful consideration of the pros and cons might lead one who did not know him personally to infer that he held no very definite opinions in the wider philosophical fields of speculation. On the contrary, he had very strong predilections, but he had so thoroughly trained himself to control his personal opinions that he kept them well in hand.