

CHAPTER 4

Society Are People

SOCIETY IS A COLLECTIVE CONCEPT and nothing else; it is a convenience for designating a number of people. So, too, is family or crowd or gang, or any other name we give to an agglomeration of persons. Society is different from these other collective nouns in that it conveys the idea of a purpose or point of contact in which each individual, while retaining his identity and pursuing his private concerns, has an interest. A family is held together by family ties, a crowd consists of a number of people bent on some common venture, such as a baseball game or a lecture. Society, on the other hand, embraces the father and the son, the doctor and the farmer, the financier and the laborer—a host of people following all sorts of vocations and avocations, pursuing a variety of goals, each in his own way, and yet held together by a purpose which is in each of them. But Society is still a word, not an entity. It is not an extra “person”; if the census totals a hundred million, that’s all there are, not one more, for there cannot be any accretion to Society except by procreation. The concept of Society as a metaphysical person falls flat when we observe that Society disappears when the component parts disperse; as in the case of a “ghost town” or of a civilization we learn about by the artifacts they left

behind. When the individuals disappear so does the whole. The whole has no separate existence.

Using the collective noun with a singular verb leads us into a trap of the imagination; we are prone to personalize the collectivity and to think of it as having a body and a psyche of its own. We transfer to this mental fabrication some habits or characteristics of the individuals who are the reality; rather, we pick out of the heterogeneity some traits that seem to be common to all the parts and ascribe them to the image in our minds. And so we speak of a Mormon Society, an agricultural Society, an advanced Society; in point of fact, Society cannot be religious, has no occupation, is incapable of advancement; these are attributes of individual persons. It is a legerdemain of language. We invent a word to create an impression rather than a measurable fact, and then we use the word as if indeed it does represent a measurable fact.

All of which is self-evident and would hardly be worth mentioning if this literary usage did not lead us into blind alleys. From describing Society as if it were a person, we slide into the habit of judging each member of the group by our impression of the whole, and of acting upon that judgment. By this mental trick the well-advertised pathology of the Nazi hierarchy was transferred to all Germans and, as its enemy, we decided that the only good German was a dead one. The mass mania of war is a product of this habit of personification; it then becomes a matter of honor, not a murder, to destroy the uniform of this personification. This negation of the individual, by use of words, is the premise of every socialistic rationale; socialism hasn't a leg to stand on until the individual, like a lump of sugar, is verbally dis-

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solved in the personification of a class. Every political scheme to "improve" Society rests on this trick of words.

For that reason it is necessary to point out that Society is nothing but a handy word, a symbol, and that we are talking about persons, each driven by the primordial urgency to live, according to his lights and by the limitations of his inherent capacities. Society is an institution invented by man to further his purposes and his aspirations. It is, like a labor-saving device, something that helps him improve his circumstances with a saving of effort.

Everything is entitled to a beginning, and the beginning of Society has long engaged the curiosity of philosophic speculation. In that field it has become almost an axiom that Society began with the organization of the family. That may or may not be true. Yet, the theory does not explain the known organization of groups where the binding tie of consanguinity was missing, as often happened in the colonization of America or the settling of our West. If there ever was a "first" Society, it is reasonable to presume it came about just as did these communities; assuming, of course, that man is what he always was. Of the inception and development of these communities we have complete records—they happened, so to speak, under our noses—and their gestation followed a pattern so uniform as to suggest a principle of Society.

Every pioneer, alone or in family, who settled on a spot around which a metropolis eventually grew had to forage for such necessaries as nature could supply him almost ready-made. That was so whether he was an escapee from the gallows or from religious persecution. Being human, he selected for his workshop that place which, because of fer-

tility of soil, supply of water, abundance of wild life, promised to yield him the highest wages for his labor. The job-and-home seeker in the second covered wagon is likewise influenced in his selection of a location, but as between two or more locations of equal promise he picks one nearest his predecessor. Why? The solace and comfort of companionship is a consideration. But neighborliness that is confined to passing the time of day is rather thin stuff, and will not last long unless it is implemented with a substantial binding. That binding is the increase of satisfactions made possible by cooperation, in the building of a house, in putting up a supply of kindling wood, in the quartering of an animal. In many jobs two can produce more than twice as much as each worker going it alone, while some tasks simply cannot be performed by one man. As a result of cooperative effort each has more satisfactions, more wages. Sociability thrives on the mutual profits of cooperation, and when we observe how acquaintance ripens into friendship as the mutually created wage level rises, it is hard to tell which is cause and which is effect.

Immigration to the community is in proportion to the opportunities for profitable employment afforded by this environment as against others that may be available. New workers all are lured by the prospect of self-improvement. Though they come from rack-rented Ireland or the marginal mountains of Sweden, though they speak the jargon of the ghetto or wallow in Slavic consonants, whether they escaped from the squalor of Welsh mining towns or the jobless shops of New England, they find in this selected location a common point of contact: an abundance burgeoning from nature and cooperation. Differences in race, religion, languages, and customs arouse curiosity, and sometimes irritation, but the

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contribution of each worker to the general fund of wealth tends to liquidate these surface dissimilarities. The rising wage level makes for a blending of cultural particularisms.

As soon as subsistence ceases to be a pressing problem, as evidenced by the bulging barn, an urgency arises for satisfactions that during the economy of scarcity were hardly dreams. The log cabin which was castle enough is now in dire need of curtains, furniture, pictures; a sense of dignity suggests a Sunday go-to-meeting suit of clothes; the barn that served as a place of worship must be supplanted with a fitting edifice; and every mother thinks of the world her son could conquer if the vistas of learning were opened for him. But the satisfaction of these new desires calls for specialized labor, for skills and knowledge which the self-sufficient jack-of-all-trades does not have. At this point in the growth of Society comes, either from within the group or from outside, one who because of his aptitude for the trade offers his services as a blacksmith. The need for such services suggests to him that the others will pay him at least as much as he can earn at the common extractive occupation. The profit motive—that is, the urge to satisfy desires with the least exertion—turns him into a specialist. But the profit motive works bilaterally. The farmer who patronizes the specialist does so because he can more profitably put in his time at farming than at blacksmithing. The relationship between buyer and seller rests on reciprocal gains.

The specialist does not appear until there is population enough to need him, and until that population has acquired an abundance. It is the stored-up labor in the barns, the capital, that suggests the possibility of hiring a tailor, a preacher, a teacher or pedlar, of getting rid of the do-it-yourself jobs which necessity forces on them, which they do

as best they can and which interfere with the work they are better equipped to do. Capital accumulation is the necessary antecedent of specialization. As more and more producers come to this pioneer community, either as specialists or primary extractors (who become, by the shifting of marginal burdens to others, specialists on their own account), the capital or savings accounts swell, all the while awakening new desires. That is the way of man. In a century or two, capital accumulations reach a point where the cobbler is replaced by a shoe factory, the pedlar by a department store, and the little red schoolhouse by a college. Specialization has piled on specialization not by conscious design and certainly not by coercion, but by (a) increasing population, (b) a consequent rise in the level of wages, and (c) the savings that this rise makes possible. Trace these factors to their causative principle and you come to the workings of the "economic man"—seeking ever to improve his circumstances and to widen his circumstances by the most efficient means at his disposal.

We are speaking of the rise and development of American Society. Other social integrations, like those of Tibet or Abyssinia, never emerged from the primitive stage, and still others, like those of Europe, took a much longer time in arriving at a comparative level. The difference cannot be accounted for by the make-up of these peoples, for the American Society is a composite of the peoples of the world, each of whom played their economic part according to the script. No doubt, climatic conditions and the availability of natural resources influenced the course of American Society, for man is, after all, a "land animal." But other peoples similarly blessed did not "go places," or as fast, and for cause we must look to some special advantage the American en-

joyed. By the process of elimination we come to this special advantage: freedom. Not only freedom from political restraints but also freedom from the inhibitions that institutionalized tradition imposes on man's aspirations. The early American did not have an expensive government to support, little in the way of taxation to deprive him of his savings, no traditional caste system to depress his sense of self-importance. A few of these restraining influences he did import, to his hindrance, but they had not had time enough to become entrenched and institutionalized in the wilderness. He was free to work out his destiny according to his capacities. And he chose to follow his natural bent, to better his wages by cooperation and specialization, to save some of the increase and to invest it in devices that enabled him to produce more with less effort. He was a capitalist on the loose.

Society is a growth, with roots imbedded in its component units. It is no more a manufactured thing than is a tree, although like the tree its growth can be impeded by artificial impediments or facilitated by their removal. There is a current conceit that Society can be fabricated, like a chair or a shoe, by imposing the achievements of one group of people on another. Seeing that the special characteristic of what we call an advanced culture is its fund of capital, the conceit holds that the showering of this fund on a "backward" people will speed their advancement. The idea is as silly as that of forcing a child to keep pace with an adult. A factory does not make Society, but a Society makes a factory. When an itinerant tailor could take care of their clothing needs, the pioneer community would have found a clothing factory in its midst something of a monstrosity; only when the population was large enough and productive enough to take care of its antecedent desires did the idea of a steel mill suggest itself. One

gratification gives rise to another desire, and if the second calls for techniques hitherto unknown, man will take thought and invent them. But he must have freedom to do so. That is what a "backward" people lack most; either expropriation of their goods discourages production and makes accumulation impossible, or habits of mind induced by political or cultural institutions inhibit the impulse to dream. The necessary ingredient of progress is freedom.

The benefits of specialization are not without offset. As the pioneer turns more and more to the professional carpenter for help, he loses the skill which necessity forced him to develop, and the son who eventually takes over the establishment is unable to put up a shelf in the house his father built whole. The correlative of specialization is interdependence. In a highly developed Society, where each worker's contribution is a small fraction of the whole, the reliance of one on another is the condition of existence. New York hungers when a snow storm cuts off its means of communication with the farm.

It is this fact that lends credence to the fantasy of a transcendent Society. When we think of the myriad of workers involved in the production of a cup of coffee—plantation workers and bank presidents, dockmen and railroad engineers, dairy farmers and sugar refiners—we are overwhelmed by the immensity of the process and are prone to personalize it; a mental trick not unlike that of deifying the incomprehensible storm. Yet, there is no such thing as "social production"—if by that term something more than individual production is implied. Society cannot produce a thing; only individuals produce. Though a million men are involved in the job, each one, as an individual, had a hand in the pro-

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duction of that cup of coffee. If one of the million drops out of the line and is not replaced, the cup of coffee is not produced, does not reach the consumer. The output of the conveyor belt is in exact proportion to the number of workers who man it.

You come to the same conclusion when you answer the question, why do men work? To satisfy their desires—and for no other reason. The clerk who makes out the bill of lading for the shipment of coffee is not motivated by an interest in that document or in the coffee; he does the job only because by that means he can satisfy his desires, among which coffee may not be an item. If it were not possible for him to exchange the proceeds of his effort for the things he desires, he would have to give up clerking and address himself to the getting of those things some other way—perhaps by going back to a primitive economy. Every worker works for himself. Every worker is impelled to labor by the will to live, and there is no way of transferring that will to another person or a collectivity of persons. Therefore, the hypnotic phrase “social production”—as meaning more than the sum total of the production of individuals—is only a mischievous abstraction that bears watching. It is a phrase that looms large in the jargon of socialism.

Society consists of Tom and Dick and Harry.