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Problems in American History

The other day a prominent member of the state Senate remarked to me, "You do not mean to say that there is anything of importance in American history not already adequately treated?" In point of fact, it is doubtful whether any historical field needs more workers or offers more inviting material than does that of the United States. The older writers on the subject, coming, like all wise men, from the East, have largely restricted their view to the Atlantic coast. The history of the old thirteen colonies has been studied in certain lines with minute care; their institutions have been laboriously trailed back into the German forests; and the whole drama of the development of the United States has been presented on the stage between the Allegheny Mountains and the Atlantic. If the West was treated at all by the older writers, and notably by the writers of our textbooks, it was made incidental to the historical movements in which the north and south regions of the Atlantic coast were engaged.

In commenting upon the constitutional history of a recent American writer, Professor von Holst remarks that the work is the play of *Hamlet* with Hamlet omitted, because the slavery struggle is not brought into prominence. Future critics may say of Professor von Holst's great work on the same subject that it also is the play of *Hamlet* with the title role left out, because in his attention to slavery he has lost sight of the fundamental, dominating fact in United States history, the expansion of the United States from the Alleghenies to the Pacific; and has not taken note of the evolution

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of political and constitutional institutions resulting from this expansion. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast; it is the Mississippi Valley. The struggle over slavery is a most important incident in our history, but it will be seen, as the meaning of events unfolds, that the real lines of American development, the forces dominating our character, are to be studied in the history of westward expansion.

In a sense, American history up to our own day has been colonial history, the colonization of the Great West. This ever retreating frontier of free land is the key to American development. The work of the historian of the United States is to account for the predominant characteristics of the United States of today, by comparative and genetic study; to enable the present age to understand itself by understanding its development from the past. To state this is to show the inadequacy of our histories. American history needs a connected and unified account of the progress of civilization across this continent, with the attendant results. Until such a work is furnished we shall have no real national self-consciousness; when it is done, the significance of the discovery made by Columbus will begin to appear.

From the point of view of United States constitutional history there is a wide field scarcely tilled. How little is known of some of our leading institutions. For example, where is to be found an adequate history of the extension of the suffrage in America; or a history of the ballot; of the growth of committee government in Congress; of the power of the speaker of the House of Representatives; of the development and operation of the system of government of the American territories; of the enlargement of the sphere of federal action by judicial decisions, of the development of party conventions and their machinery; of political events in the various states in relation to the central government; of the sources of, and changes in, the various state constitutions? Who has worked out the effect of American political institutions on Europe—in the extension of the franchise; in the spread of written constitutions; in the furtherance of federation in Europe and among the other American nations? A bare enumeration of the most pressing problems in constitutional history would fill the limits of this paper.

But behind institutions, behind constitutional forms, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet

changing conditions. The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they are compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of a remarkably developing, expanding people. The institutional framework of the nation may be likened to the anatomy of the body politic; its physiology is the social and economic life molding this framework to new uses. Here it is that we find the field for widest study. Let the student survey this organism, the American commonwealth; let him select its essential features and then trace their development. When once the investigator grasps this conception, he has found a life work, a work demanding the cooperative study of many students for generations.

Without attempting any systematic presentation, we may with profit consider some of the problems in our social and economic history.

In the settlement of America we have to observe how European life entered the continent, and how America modified that life and reacted on Europe. Something has already been said of America's political influence upon Europe; and it is not necessary to do more than call attention to the many problems connected with American economic and social influence on the Old World. Who shall measure the effect on Europe of free land in America? These effects are hard to ascertain and describe, but surely something ought to be done toward investigating the influence of America in promoting free speech, in advancing democracy, in affecting food and prices and industrial and commercial conditions in Europe. America has given occasion for a new Migration of the Peoples comparable to the older one. Such questions should receive attention by the American student.

When we turn to consider our history from the point of view of America itself, the abundance of material unused is still more inviting. As I have before remarked, the subject is at bottom the study of European germs developing in an American environment. But little has yet been done toward investigating the part played by the environment in determining the lines of our development. In the first placed, there is need for thorough study of the physiographic basis of our history. When the geologist, the meteorologist, the biologist, and the historian shall go hand in hand in this study, they will see how largely American history has been determined by natural conditions. For example, the lines of settlement were chiefly

fixed by river valleys, mountain gaps, and isotherms. Study the maps in *Scribner's Statistical Atlas* in which the settled area is colored for the various census periods, and you will perceive that the dark portion flows forward like water on an uneven surface; here and there are tongues of settlement pushed out in advance, and corresponding projections of wilderness wedged into the advancing mass. The map for the next census will show gaps filled in, and the process repeated on a new frontier line. There is much material for investigation of the physical causes of this uneven advance, and the relation of these causes to our social and economic characteristics. The last census divides the country into regions having distinct physical peculiarities, and gives the population for these regions as compared with the population in the previous decade. It would be an interesting study to see how far these physical differences correspond to social and economic differences among the people who inhabit them. Again consider the location of our cities. The geologist will tell you that the fall line determined where our Atlantic cities should be placed, and will predict where population will coagulate in the undeveloped West. These and similar relations need to be investigated by the student of history.

The native populations have also been determining factors in our development. Investigation will reveal the fact that settlement has not only flowed around physical obstacles, following the lines of least resistance, but that the location of the Indian tribes has been influential in determining the lines and character of the advance. The student of aboriginal conditions learns also that the buffalo trail became the Indian trail, that these lines were followed by the white hunter and trader, that the trails widened into roads, the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads. The Baltimore and Ohio road is the descendant of the old national turnpike, and this of an Indian trail once followed by George Washington in his visits to the French. The trading posts reached by these trails were on the sites of Indian villages, which had been placed in positions suggested by nature, and these trading posts grew into cities. Thus civilization in America has followed the arteries made by geology, pouring an ever richer tide through them, until at last the slender paths of aboriginal intercourse have been broadened and interwoven into the complex mazes of modern commercial lines; the wilderness has been interpenetrated by

lines of civilization, growing ever more numerous. It is like the steady growth of a complex nervous system for the originally simple inert continent. If one would understand why we are today a nation rather than a collection of isolated states, he must study this economic and social consolidation of the country. In this progress from savage conditions lie topics for the evolutionist.

Another set of problems which need study is to be found in the effect of the Indian on our political institutions. The earliest colonial unions were in a large measure due to the need for a concerted Indian policy. In every colony and in Congress peculiar institutions were evolved to deal with the Indian, and some of our most important diplomatic affairs have been interwoven with Indian matters. The great contrast between Spanish America and English America is to be explained not solely by race, but also in part by the combined influences of physical geography and the Indians with whom the settlers came in contact. Latin America was built on an Indian foundation; it incorporated a large measure of Indian life. This was not the case with the English colonists; they met with a different class of Indians. Mr. Payne in his *America* has well said: "American history cannot be treated as a simple expansion of European enterprise on the virgin soil of the transatlantic continent." The peculiarly *American* influences offer many unstudied topics to the investigator.

Considering American history as concerned with the colonization of the continent, we find it divided into four periods. First, the period of Atlantic colonization; this is the familiar field of American historians. Second, the colonization of the region between the Allegheny Mountains and the Mississippi; in this field a beginning has been made by such writers as Roosevelt, in his *Winning of the West,* and Hinsdale, in his *Old Northwest.* Third, the colonization of the basin of Great Salt Lake and the Pacific coast; this is the field in which Hubert Bancroft has done such notable work. Fourth, the colonization of the region between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi; this is almost virgin soil for the historical student. Upon each one of these periods independent, original investigation is demanded.

In the first period, that of Atlantic colonization, we find the planting in America of various European peoples, whose coming ought to be more carefully considered in the light of contemporary Eu-

ropean history. Our colonial period proper is the period when Europe flowed over into America most directly, and when rival nations struggled to incorporate America into the European system and to monopolize the continent. The investigator cannot properly understand this movement if he isolates it from its European connection, as many of our historians do. He should trace back to their origin the European ideas, politics, economics, religious and social conditions which were brought to this country.

Another fact has not been adequately considered in American colonial history, namely, the process of sectionalization of the Atlantic coast. More thorough investigation should be given to that process which resulted in creating three distinct sections in the East. The evolution of sections in our history is a far deeper fact than the development of state particularism, for whatever force the latter had came in a large degree from its association with sectionalism. One of these Atlantic sections, moreover, has never been studied with the care due to its importance. The Middle region, entered by New York harbor, was an open door to all Europe. The South represented typical England, modified by a warm clime and servile labor; New England stood for a special English movement—Puritanism; the Middle region was less English than the other sections. It had a wide mixture of nationalities, a varied society, the mixed town and country system of local government, a varied economic life, many religions. In short, it was a region mediate between New England and the South, and the East and the West. It represents that composite nationality which the contemporary United States exhibits, that juxtaposition of non-English groups, occupying a valley or a little settlement and presenting reflections of the map of Europe in their variety. It was democratic and nonsectional, if not national; "easy, tolerant, and contented;" rooted strongly in material prosperity. It was typical of the modern United States. Now this section has been less studied than any of the others; it offers no such peculiarities as New England; it had not the slave to create an interest in it, as had the South; it was not productive of historians. It is to be hoped that before long this section will be given the study which its importance demands.

Another line of investigation lies in tracing the extension of these sections, with their conflicting characteristics, toward the West. Following isotherms, the men of these sections entered the Missis-

sippi Valley. The New England and Middle sections took their way along the route now marked by the Erie Canal and the Ohio River and mingled in the northern belt of states, carrying with them their school systems, their systems of local government, their literature and ideas. Another current from the South moved side by side with this to the West. In the Mississippi Valley they found no dividing line, such as the Ohio and the Potomac; the Father of Waters drew them into contact, and in the struggle for ascendancy the Missouri and the Kansas and Nebraska slavery questions arose. Many other examples of these contentions between the migrating sections may be found, for example, the struggle between the Northern town and the Southern county system of local government in Illinois; and the boundary question between Illinois and Wisconsin, when Northern Illinois threatened to join Wisconsin. Many opportunities are open for studying the West from this point of view.

Somewhat like the previous topic is the subject of interstate migration in the West. In a recent book called *The Puritan in Holland, England, and America* Mr. Campbell has called attention to the influence of the Dutchmen who settled on the east coast of England at the time of the struggles of the Neverthelands with Spain. It is shown that thousands of Dutch artisans settled in the very districts in England which afterward were most vigorously Puritan; and it is contended that a clear connection between this immigration and the Puritan movement in England can be established. Now if one takes the *Statistical Atlas of the United States,* before mentioned, and examines the maps showing the location in 1880 of emigrants from each of the older states, he will be struck at once with the widespread character of this movement, and he will perceive that interstate migration means not merely the interchange of so many men, but the migration of their ideas and institutions as well. This is what explains the steady nationalization of the United States as time goes on. State sovereignty is lost in the West, where appears a checkerboard division of states which recruit their population from all parts of the Union. But there was a period when this worked otherwise. For an example, which may serve to indicate the whole problem, take the case of South Carolina, which in the period from 1820 to 1860 (as General Walker has shown) was a beehive from which swarms were continually going forth to populate the newer cotton-growing states of the Southwest.

South Carolina had given to the other states nearly twenty-seven per cent of her entire native stock, and of these states Georgia had fifty-five thousand at the time of the war, and Mississippi thirty-six thousand. The result was clearly in the direction of sectionalizing the whole region and of making the political ideas of Calhoun the dominating ones of the section. Another example of this same line of investigation is shown in the essay by Henry Cabot Lodge on "The Distribution of Ability in the United States," in which he points out the intellectual place of New England. The spread of New England men meant the spread of New England culture. One should also study the effect of this westward movement in changing the character of the states from which the migration proceeds.

Contemporaneously with the colonization of the West by native Americans—emigrants from the Eastern states—the immigration from Europe has gone on, the colonization of then Western prairies and the Eastern cities by a new Wandering of the Peoples. Massachusetts, once the home of an almost absolutely homogeneous English people, now vies with Wisconsin and Minnesota in the proportion of her foreign born. These immigrants have come to us not merely so much bone and sinew, they have brought with them traditions, habits, ideas, born of their European experience. They should be studied with this fact in mind. There is no longer that quick reception and Americanization of these immigrants which we see in earlier days. They settle in compact communities. Whole quarters in cities, almost whole counties in rural districts, are occupied by people from some particular European section. We shall not understand the contemporary United States without studying immigration historically. Another line of investigation in the same direction consists in the study of that interesting process whereby the people of a single county (or township at least) will in successive years be at one time preponderantly American, then Irish, or Scotch, then German, then Bohemian; or will represent some similar series of occupations, the later immigrants dispossessing the previous nationality. An interesting economic study in connection with the law of rent might here be made, but there are social considerations also to be reckoned with.

Perhaps no topic in American history so much demands investigation as does the history of the management of our public domain, with the associated topics, internal improvements and railroad

building. Space forbids the enumeration of the problems, economic, social, and political—such as the democratization of the country—which have grown out of free land. But perhaps enough has been said to show the importance of studying our history from the point of view of the West. What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that the ever retreating Great West has been to the eastern United States directly, and to the nations of Europe more remotely.