ABSOLUTISTIC DRIFT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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The highly pluralistic nature of the social facts of our day, as well as the greatly divergent types of theories offered in explanation of these facts, is too obvious to be ignored even by the most wishful seeker for certainty. It is possible to assert, and with an excellent show of proofs, that never before, since anything like a high degree of civilization dawned on this earth, has there been such a divergent array of economic, governmental, and social programs, policies, and principles as now assault us from every quarter. For the moment we need not call attention to new movements, new schools, new Chicago plans in art, literature, and education. We are assured that this is a new age, and the proof of complete newness lies in the disagreement of this present with all the past certainties, and in an even larger disagreement between the elements of this present age.

In short, we admit a high degree of plurality in the drifts of contemporary society. However, confusion is no proof that the absolutistic spirit has been abandoned. If there are as many, or more, divergencies today as ever have existed before, it is equally certain that more separate kinds of dogmatism afflict the race today than ever it has suffered under before. The race may be more highly pluralistic in its doctrines than before, but the groups know their minds. Have we not a thousand patriotic societies to tell us our perfect American duty, or is it only a hundred?

Democracy is a highly pluralistic philosophy of government, resting, as it professes, on the present majority opinion of the citizens. By the nature of such a governmental organization, changing policies are to be expected,
and by the nature of the citizens these shifts are likely to be frequent. However, this form of government has worked quite well in our own country for about a century and a half, and has tended to spread about the world, especially since the great war. Such a form of government is very generous in its presupposition that citizens in general are capable of forming judgments sufficiently wise and just to make a stable government. The people as a whole can be trusted even though they vary in every conceivable way. For one I greatly hope that this very great faith in the ability of men in common to cooperate effectively in the great project may finally be justified. However, the signs of the times do not seem to me to read well for the near fulfillment of this great faith.

It can scarcely be said that any of our twenty fellow American Republics have been democratic except in form, and for brief generous periods. After a time of hopeful stability they recently have suffered a relapse into what may be politely termed a "highly centralized" form of government. Of the six Republics recently formed in Europe and the near East, Spain and Greece have fallen into hands which scarcely can be said to be friends to this form of government, Poland has had a perpetual ruler, whether in or out of office, Turkey has, well, its own Levantine form of government, Germany has swung the entire distance away from democratic republicanism, and only little Czechoslovakia has maintained the faith.

Perhaps the best examples of repudiation of pluralistic liberalism and all of its works is to be seen in the course of events in Italy and Germany. These countries have struggled desperately to avoid sinking into economic destitution and into a bottomless abyss of spiritual hopelessness, and Germany, at least, is still so struggling. In Italy the dire necessity for order, any order, heaved forward a powerful and unexpected personality. Personally I do not like dictators, but I can not escape the conviction that Mussolini was an answer to the prayer
for help of a large, and what proved to be the dominant, part of the Italian people. This ex-socialist, now turned ruler, expressed his changed sentiments concerning the greatest of the democratic virtues: “I insult liberty, I spit upon her,” and added that what was needed in the modern world was order and discipline. All pluralistic tendencies to freedom of opinion and liberty of expression are to be exterminated by one absolute will. The Napoleonic, man of destiny theory of history does not, I think, explain the present governmental condition in Italy. There has been a real drift here toward absolutism in the emotions and the thinking of a nation. Mussolini discovered and was able to direct a national tendency, in which he himself shared.

The drift toward absolutism seems to me even more clearly marked in Germany. Here is a country which did not lack discipline. She had had her Luther, her Kant, her Goethe, and a host of other lovers of freedom, and had taken them seriously. And now she has submitted to the autocratic domination of a personality, which is not, to speak mildly, attractive to the rest of the world. On its surface the career of Adolph Hitler is an enigma. How could this happen with a nation which has given so much of what we like to term modern civilization? It surely would be a shallow analysis which got no further than handsome Adolph in its explanation of Nazism. Defeated Germany’s greatest problem was recovery of her own self-respect, and I believe that this is still her fundamental problem. She has other problems, to be sure, profound economic distress, dangerous divisions within the state, self-defense in the presence of victorious and implacable foes, but if she was to save her soul from utter damnation she must feel equal. But how could she feel equal, disarmed and helpless, ringed about by enemies who were madly arming? This at least seems to have been Germany’s view of her position. It may have been very unwise of her to have turned to the one voice which spoke with confidence. This voice may have been
the voice of dangerous folly but it did awaken the spirit of the German people. With deep abnegation of much, perhaps most, of what is great in their life, this people fell in behind an absolute dictator and committed themselves, mind and body, to his leadership. Of course I do not know whether they have done wisely thus to follow the councils of desperation, but to me it is horrible that such a people should have been brought to such a pass. We may like or we may not like Germany, but whatever Germany does is certainly a noteworthy tendency in modern society, and Germany has gone absolutistic in complete fashion.

Of Russia I will say little, for I know even less about her than about the countries of which I have spoken. Of one thing I suppose we may be certain, that she is completely totalitarian, or at least that she means so to be. The situation here seems very different, a vast, meagerly developed country, with a population of a hundred and sixty millions of peoples of many races, in large part of Asiatic traditions and character. From much that is said and written about Russia I gather that many of my fellow countrymen think that absolutism is good enough for such a people. We will not be able to ignore Russia. Her very ponderousness tends to pull the nations out of their orbits, directly as the mass and inversely as the square of the distance, perhaps, but the mass is great.

Perhaps this calling of the roll of the nations has already gone too far, even unto tediousness, but I can not omit to mention one more nation, namely our own. Our drift toward centralization of government may be said to have begun with the influence of John Marshall, was strongly accelerated by the Civil War and the federal measures which grew out of it, was emphasized by the struggle of the Federal Government to control Big Business by such measures as the Anti-trust Laws, later by the Federal Reserve banking system, by the struggles of the Hoover administration to support the financial structure of the country at the onset of the depression,
and by the contemporary efforts of the New Deal to engender recovery by massed efforts of the Federal Government. Our effort in the World War taught us the technique of nation-wide cooperation, and we also learned then that only the Federal Government can serve as an agency for any great, common effort.

The relief and the recovery efforts of the present have made clear to us that our states are helpless in any real crisis. We turn at once to the central power at such times, forgetting the sovereign states. The Federal Government has come to symbolize for us our only help in meeting any considerable problem. Agriculture can not produce the raw materials for food and clothing without A. A. A., business can not be financed without F. R. C., building can not be revived without P. W. A., and our homes can not be saved without H. O. L. C. Industry in trying to police itself has formulated over five hundred and fifty codes, under governmental supervision, of course. The recalcitrant ten per cent is to be taught cooperation, forcibly if necessary. What a field for the study of Ethics of the as is, and what a hope-inspiring chance for a world of fair dealing at last, if we are up to it. In this paper I am neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the principles and policies of the New Deal but am calling attention to the fact that when the country is confronted by a real problem we now turn spontaneously to the central government. Measures of social security, unemployment insurance, public health, child protection, these are now considered federal problems by what appears to be a vast majority of our citizens, and this is a real change in American public attitude, away from local autonomy and individualism and towards a totalitarian state. This change in public opinion is not being caused by any conscious shift of ideology on the part of the masses of citizens but is the result of the pressure of social problems of vast proportions. This spontaneous turning to the central authority as the only possible source of help shows the strength of our drift toward
centralization of governmental and social authority. And now follows the next stage of this drift toward absolutism in our social organization. If the central government is to furnish these great services to the citizens it must have the authority and the power to carry through the new program. It is interesting to notice that in this greatly heightened function of the central government it is the executive branch which has received all of the increase of power, these new powers being placed in the hands of one man, the president. The legislative branch has freely granted the desired powers to the executive branch.

To be sure, much of the recent vast increase of federal executive powers is justified as necessary emergency measures designed to meet an emergency comparable to war conditions. This simply means that when the nation needs to exert its whole power then complete cooperation is necessary. Centralization of direction is the only answer to that demand. But in our present situation it is very questionable whether government will be able to lay down the powers which it now has. After all, this depression is not analogous to war in some important respects. When war stops it is over, but when, for example, will the unemployment of millions of our workers be at an end? No one knows the number of unemployed workers, nor how many of these are really employable, nor what proportion of the employable can hope for jobs when we are again on what may be considered a normal basis of production in a world such as that in which we now live. My belief is that several millions of these jobs are gone not to return, and that permanent provision will have to be made for the millions who have depended on those jobs. Such provision for so large a number of our people will need a readjustment so vast that only a central government with great powers can even attempt it.

But these are not the only drifts in our national life which insure that we will be compelled to have a govern-
ment of sufficient power to make its mandates work, quickly and decisively. For many years our industrial and financial structure has so grown in size and in complexity that the ordinary units of government are helpless in its regulation. To me it seems natural that quantity production should be the outcome of civilization of any high level. Why should not more of the things needful to man be produced when his ingenuity and his knowledge of the forces of nature make this possible? But this means greater units of production and larger organizations of men, materials, and capital. So large have these aggregations become that the question of their governance has become an acute one. What seems good for and to one organized interest is not necessarily good for other interests, and much less for the good of the whole country. Such organizations are interstate, and even international in the score of their operations, and in the extent of their power. These vast cooperations are a function of the complexity of modern life, or shall we say that what we call modern life is a function of the endeavors of these large scale service units? In any case we need these extended and specialized services if we are to live the life which we call modern.

But these extended service units can not even control themselves. If they reach monopolistic proportions they can indeed manage their affairs to suit themselves, but it has not been found that such an arrangement suits the interests of those whom they serve, nor the interests of those who serve them. These great interests tend to war amongst themselves. Witness the nation wide contest between the truck hauled freight interests and the rail borne freight interests. Who can and must regulate this rivalry? The bitter conflict between labor and management in industry is a nuisance and a menace to the country as a whole. Who is to adjudicate the divergent interests here? Are the savings and the investments of all the people to be left to the discretion of private financial institutions? In the stage of relatively small
beginnings perhaps such individualism was best, or inevitable at least. But if the investor is one of the seven hundred thousand holders of the stock of our largest motor corporation his individualistic initiative does not count for much. The largest of all social organizations, government, seems the only possible answer to these intricate and puzzling questions of social control. The citizens may not have the self-control, nor the insight, to build a government of sufficient power and wisdom to control these vast and intricate specialized interests, such as the public service corporations, but what else is there to look to for aid? So we are drifting into a highly centralized management of society. We may not think that we like absolutism, but we are getting it in the big world.

But what of the serene world of thought, as contrasted with the world of practice where changes are coming with such amazing rapidity? Are there any drifts toward absolutism in the universe of discourse, where men judge and evaluate? I do not descry any conscious movement toward absolutism in the world of reflective system building.

There are certain writers who are feeling their way to a new philosophy of society and of personal living. They are not of our guild but they find a wide reading. In a late book H. G. Wells offers an "Experiment in Autobiography," an attempt to explain himself to himself quite as much as to his public. He urges us to a new world order through a constructive world revolution, which he calls the "Open Conspiracy." This new social order is not to be a dictatorship of the proletariat but the rule of the competent. The socialistic world state may come quickly, precipitated by war or by economic stress, or it may take generations of propaganda, by means of a new education. He even supplies a religion, saying that devotion to the new world state has released qualities of the same nature as the elder religions. This dedication to the world state has the monistic quality of any other consolation system.
This sounds very much like humanism of the social type or like the positivistic religion of Auguste Comte, the worship of humanity, but with a considerable discrimination as to what type of humanity is to release our devotional emotion. Personally I am in no way contemptuous toward such publicists as H. G. Wells and Walter Lippmann. They may be the forerunners of a fresh application of philosophy to contemporary life. If those who make philosophy a profession have little or nothing to say concerning the problems of their own day it is inevitable that leaders of thought should appear from some other direction. These new comers will not please our sense of academic propriety but for all that they may enter in before us and find the problems which have meaning in the actual world, while we stand without, knocking and calling to Aristotle to admit us to the world of philosophy which makes a difference. I fear that his answer will be, Depart for I never knew you, I who was interested in everything which happened in or to Greece when I lived there.

But I am sure that there is no jealousy in our spirits toward anyone who brings order in the disordered thoughts of men. He will write the philosophy of our confused day who can. And it would be quite in the tradition of philosophy for nonprofessionals to lead the advance into the new interpretation. Witness Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. And is not the time ripe for a new synthesis? If need were a portent then could we all look hopefully. This need for insight and synthesis is found not only in our governmental and economic confusion but no less in the confused state of esthetics, ethics and religion. It could be plausibly argued that the first mentioned types of confusion are the effects of the second types.

The question is as to whether our present piecemeal methods of pursuing philosophy can at all meet our situation. For example, take the papers and discussions of one of the meetings of the American Philosophical Asso-
cation. For the most part these efforts are concerned with minute criticism of some obscure point which few of the philosophers, who have taken the trouble to attend, care about. In a moment of discouragement one is tempted to say that these exhibitions constitute a denial of philosophy. Of course it is appropriate that subjects of discussion should be somewhat technical when professionals meet in conference, but it is not so appropriate when no unity or direction appears in the discussions as a whole. Would it be in good taste in one of our philosophical meetings to present a discussion of a problem of broad and fundamental significance? I saw this tried once in a presidential address of the Eastern Philosophical Association, and the response was a shocked silence. Perhaps we have lost philosophy and compensate by a busy occupation over minute thought fragments.

But it is certain that the materials of philosophy were never more abundant, more interesting, nor more urgent in their demand for consideration. I need not assure you that I am no prophet; however, I was named for a half prophet, a sort of manager, Ezra, the coadjutor of Nehemiah the rebuild of Jerusalem, and on this slender connection I will venture a prophecy of the future of philosophy. An emergence, in intensified form, of the immemorial conflict between materialism and idealism will come to pass in our day. These are the natural enemies in philosophy, and in their struggle no peace can be declared. The reason for their implacable conflict is that each of these systems is absolutistic in its essence. Do not these two systems divide the world of philosophy between themselves, and are not all other systems of philosophy tentative, middleground positions? Philosophical discussion is a more urbane and agreeable occupation where we can keep the argument in the atmosphere of nothing-too-much, as once I heard two critical realists do in debating the relative roles of the percept and the "sensa" in the knowledge act. Does the percept make all the advances in its wooing of the object-thing, or does the
object-thing also, somewhat mitigating its coyness, advance a bit toward the encounter? Each of the sides to this marriage of knowledge had its champion, and so intimate did the description of this approach become that some of the more modest of these present were brought almost to the averting of their faces. It was a happy moment in an otherwise dull session, and recalled one of the problems of the modern youth movement, namely, which sex should make the advances, or if both may make them, then in what degree? But we live in a rude age, which has the disagreeable tendency of coming at once at the raw essentials of a question; one is for or against. We liberals prefer a median, tentative position, which is the location of greatest danger. The liberal needs to be armored on all sides, for that is the direction from which the bricks will come. The liberal, in trying to understand and be fair to all sides, gets himself detested by parties of both extremes, and is having a rough time of it. Can he hold out or will the spirit of the age compel him to accept a banner and march with some battalion? But liberalism is a spirit rather than a philosophy, so perhaps we wander from our subject.

The short history of Pragmatism seems to me to illustrate the fate which inevitably overtakes a philosophy which tries to avoid taking a position on the ancient contentious questions of philosophy. By many it was understood to be the American philosophy parexcellence; with its practical test of the true and the good, and with its pluralism in metaphysics, which means everything or nothing as may be most convenient, it seems to avoid many troublesome problems. Under James this genial spirit of going ahead and not bothering about ancient musings over unifying principles was very attractive. Under Dewey, if I am not mistaken, there is to be noted a progressive drift to one side of the ancient controversy, namely to the materialistic side. He may not be searching for the certainties of the past, but it appears quite evident that he has found some principle of certainty for the
present. Whether his position is right or wrong it is quite certain that he has been drawn into the fight.

Near the beginning of this paper I said that I did not descry any marked absolutistic drifts in contemporary philosophy. Perhaps I ought to suggest that there does seem to be a drift toward a thoroughgoing materialism. This is not a return to the crude atomism of Democritus. The complete change in the nature of the atom, even in our own day, has made that reversion unthinkable, but the new physics is making possible a new mechanistic concept of ultimate reality which is alluring. Not only do these new concepts of matter intrigue our minds to re-think the old problems in the new terms but they also challenge us to penetrate to far horizons where thought has never before been. This challenge is of the very stuff from which new philosophies are made.

Are there any such stirrings of life on the other side of the immemorial conflicts in philosophy, the idealistic side? I do not hear any "goings in the tops of the mulberry trees." And yet all the materials for such a movement are here. The half-expressed longings and the poorly-directed enthusiasms of classes, of nations, of races, yes, of multitudes of confused individuals, invoke a philosophy to their dire needs. In this necessity, at least, all are international. Perhaps at last a supposed law of economics will be verified, an old one, that demand makes supply. And on this very humble note of faith I will cease to prophesy.