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THE REVIVAL OF ORGANIC THEORY

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Theories of the nature of the political community vary with conditions. Just as political pluralism was a phase of the late mellowness of liberalism, so the organic theory of the state is suited for more heroic moments. When integral nationalism was discovered in the United States after the defeat of the South, it was not inappropriate that organic theories should have been supported in order to explain the place of the American nation in history. Nor can it be surprising that today some of the leaders of the United States are looking at the nation as a kind of social organism.

If one reads with attention the words of President Lincoln during the early days of the Civil War, it can be seen that the Union was more than just a voluntary association of political communities. The states had their being within the Union, and the Union itself had given birth to the states. Even the history of Texas and its relation to the Union did not impress Lincoln as simply consensual, for if there was consent it was all on the side of Texas.¹ Whatever liberty and authority the states possessed they derived from the Union, and not from any original powers of their own. When the Union became a symbol of organicity in the mind of the North, the earlier individualistic theory of the state was remote enough. The social contract, the consent of all to government, was suitable in the American Revolution, since protest was being made against the specific, arbitrary actions of the British government, animated it would seem by a total conception of Empire. To Lincoln, states, like individuals, were a part of the Union, and the Union might be broken neither by citizens nor by states.

Even before the Civil War, the principles of Manifest Destiny and the variously associated doctrines which justified expansion carried some implications of the organic character of the American nation. History, Providence, the finger of destiny—all indicated that the territory to the north and south, east and west, should become a part of the United States. The superior rights of the American nation over Indians and culturally diverse peoples were easily, even casually, asserted. The Mexicans, in the war with that nation, were regarded as an inferior and benighted people whose historic oppor-

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tunity was less than that of Americans. It cannot be said, of course, that the principle of Manifest Destiny was ever systematically explored as social doctrine, not even in the great debate of 1900 between the Democrats and Republicans over our policy of Asiatic expansion. But behind whatever doctrine might be used to justify a particular territorial expansion lay the assumption that the American nation was a unified whole, at least against all other nations, and that we had a mission to bring liberty and republican institutions to those not favored with our blessings.²

We can say, therefore, that the ground was being patiently tilled for the later and more rounded assertions of national organicity. Lincoln stands between the legalistic constructions of the Union and the assertion after the Confederate War of a genuine or explicit theory of the national organism. The purely legalistic and historic conceptions of Webster and Story give place lightly to the conception of the moral unity of a people which is superior to any documentary technicality. The publicistic assertions of the organic nature of the Union and the nation in the years following the war raise a number of questions. Were writers such as Brownson, Hurd, and Mulford³ expressing anything the American people, outside of the South, really felt? Or were they just copying European doctrines on the nature of the state which had no relevance to American conditions? Had not American nationalism gone beyond the simple assertion of the subordination of the states in the Union? Had we not progressed for the moment to the view that the individual is morally a part of the greater social whole? If we may feel sure that organic nationalism in the years after the war was a continuation and an expansion of earlier doctrines, may we not also feel that there was a general conviction that behind the Constitution was the Union, the morally united society of American citizens? If such is the case, we cannot dismiss lightly the organic nationalists of the generation after the War. They were expressing the more refined and intelligent convictions of men in the perspective of four years of struggle for the preservation of the nation.

² See, in general, Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny; A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (1935).

³ See O. A. Brownson, *The American Republic* (1866); John C. Hurd, *The Theory of Our National Existence* (1881), and *The Union State* (1890); Elisha Mulford, *The Nation* (1870); Thomas I. Cook and Arnaud B. Leavelle, "Orestes A. Brownson's 'The American Republic,'" *Review of Politics*, Vol. 4, pp. 77 ff. (1942).

The discovery of the nation required a coherent statement of the basis of the nation.

Nationalism leans toward the subordination of the individual to the historic experience of a people. How could we feel that the American nation had a mission to the rest of mankind if we did not also feel that all individuals participated in that mission by the mere fact of being a part of the larger whole?⁴ The defense of the nation, along organic lines, in the works of Francis Lieber and John W. Burgess is not to be regarded as an erratic statement of political philosophy. These writers were continuing the older, yet half-articulate, theories of organicity in national life. While Lieber spoke more of the contribution of the nation to civilized and free life, Burgess accepted also the principle of the superiority of the Teutonic peoples, including Americans, in the building of national, and therefore free, states.⁵ We may urge also that Southern thought, in its defense of Southern nationalism, was not implicitly different. The defense of the hierarchy of a slave society demanded the assertion of the supremacy of the community over the individual. The work of Calhoun indicates clearly a kind of regional organicity⁶ which the total nation was unwilling to accept.⁶

We are today engaged in a vast struggle in which the individual must be asked not to assert his individuality except in terms of the larger needs of war. The individual is a functional unit of the larger whole; the unity of the nation must transcend the diversities of thought and interest which are the luxuries of a more stable hour. Anger is rising against the presumption of class interests; labor faces a mounting volume of recrimination, which may well be followed by the assertion of national authority against its traditional claims. Business leaders who fail to perform the duties of production in war are being exposed and pilloried by investigating committees in Congress; and professional interests, such as medicine, are being mobilized in terms of military functions. Even the Gallup Poll, which implies constant division of opinion among the people, has faded from the picture, and censorship assumes a moral responsibility for the information which the average citizen may rightly have. It is a time in which we turn, as often before, to the

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nation as something which stands above the morality of individuals and groups; as men turn to the nation, they accept the moral purposes which are schematized in the utterance of leadership. The rights of individuals have meaning only in the significance of the rights and duties of the nation in a world of conflict.

A statement of prime importance in the changing theory of the state in America is the third inaugural address of President Roosevelt. The mere fact that it was the *third* inaugural has symbolic significance, for it is only a people which recognizes the moral import of the nation or the community that will stress the ethical contribution of strong leadership. In part, we have witnessed a mass flight of American citizens from the moral connotations of individuality. Times of trouble suggest to the most sturdy the moral superiority of the whole, of the group, and the ethical import of leadership. If the British may use the symbolism of monarchy to maintain the sense and integration of the whole, the American must glorify leadership, whether dead as in the case of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, or living as in the case of Franklin D. Roosevelt. We must urge, of course, that the moral response to leadership may fail with leadership itself, while the response to the organic nation involves a symbolism which, like the king, can do no wrong.

In the third inaugural, the President said:

"Lives of nations are determined, not by the count of years, but by the life-time of the human spirit. The life of a man is three-score years and ten: a little more, a little less. The life of a nation is the fullness of the measure of its will to live. . . ."

"A nation, like a person, has a body—a body that must be fed and clothed and housed, invigorated and rested, in a manner that measures up to the standards of our time."

"A nation, like a person, has a mind—a mind that must be kept informed and alert, that must know itself, that understands the hopes and the needs of its neighbors—all the other nations that live within the narrowing circle of the world."

"A nation, like a person, has something deeper, something more permanent, something larger than the sum of all its parts. It is that something which matters most to its future, which calls forth the most sacred guarding of its present."

What do these statements imply? Were they accidentally inserted in the inaugural address? We can hardly think so, for the address is a peculiarly responsible utterance. They are in the address because they fit the spirit of the times, just as Lincoln's words on the nature of the Union bespoke the rising convictions of

the North. As the President insists that individuals must seek their moral stature in the nation, so the individual is willing, in times like these, to agree.

There is nothing of the cruder concept of the social organism in the Rooseveltian theory of the organic nation. Neither the literalism of a John of Salisbury nor that of a Bluntschli is to be found in it.⁷ The American nation is plainly a moral rather than a physiological organism. Implicitly, the President's position is like that of the British idealists, such as Thomas Hill Green, whose *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* might well be understood in the present conflict in which the United States is engaged. True, idealism of this nature is authoritarian and to a degree *étatist*,⁸ but it is not theoretically arbitrary in relation to individuals. It assumes a general will, as did Green—a general will which is the expression of the permanent, common interests of free men, that is to say, morally free men and not capriciously so. It assumes likewise that the national state is the widest permanent expression of that set of common interests which is the basis of all morally free existence.

On the other hand, we must go farther. Most political leaders have moved in the direction of the organic nation. We must distinguish between the organic theory of the authoritarian states and that of the democracies. One statement in the Roosevelt exposition of the doctrine emphasizes the international relationship of nations. The permanent nation is in the context of relationship with other such nations. While the nation may not, implicitly, be submerged in the international society, it nevertheless draws part of its moral inspiration from a common democratic society extending over the world. We cannot see the idea of the superstate in Roosevelt's theory; the moral functionality of modern man comes first from the nation, and reflects itself in terms of assistance to other nations animated by similar moral and democratic purposes. In statements by Mussolini, for example, which assert a somewhat similar doctrine, the highly significant international element is completely omitted.⁹

⁷ See Francis W. Coker, *Organismic Theories of the State* (Columbia University Studies, Vol. XXXVIII, 1910).

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Thus we reach the conclusion that it is only the democratically informed nation that contributes to the moral growth and the future of the individual. But democracy again is not limited to particular structural or political devices; it is a spirit of freedom in subordination to the community that gives it form and vitality. The moral claims of such a community reach above the claims of any class or theory for the organization of society; plainly, the moral content of society is more significant than the materialistic or economic basis of the community. If we would seek analogy from the history of political thought, we should turn, in addition, to the idealism of Green, to the historicism of Burke. When Burke was rejecting the violence of the French Revolution and the revolutionism which was sweeping Europe, he turned to the moral continuity of the nation. Society was a contract, but it was a contract for the future—an implicit, necessary and unbreakable agreement between the dead, the living, and those yet to be born.¹⁰ When Roosevelt speaks of the mind, the body, and the future of the nation, he is speaking as Burke might speak today were he again to face the swelling tide of revolution and try to stem it with his own torrent of words and patriotic emotion.

As Roosevelt interprets the organicity of the American nation, there is continuity in the structure and morals of our society. There is a continuity which those newly attaining the age of citizenship must accept, and before which must bow those who come in their maturity to the responsibilities of American society. The American nation as a functioning, historic organism rejects the fascist revolution and the authoritarianism of the dictatorships; it rejects likewise, it would seem, the discontinuity in national morality implied in socialism. Roosevelt's doctrine is, withal, a doctrine of conservative nationalism. There is authority, legitimate authority, in the nation because of the moral contribution it makes to the life of each citizen. Because of this, there is permanence in the national organism. The morality of a national society expresses itself in a unified will—a unification which may be far beyond the conventional principle of federal decentralization embodied in the old but remodeled Constitution.

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