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The Mores of the Present and the Future

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By William Graham Sumner

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THE great utility of studying the origin and history of the mores would be to form judgments about their present status and future tendency. The future tendency can never be discussed beyond the immediate future without running into predictions which would always be vague and in a high degree uncertain. For instance, there is now more or less discussion about divorce, and it will unquestionably affect the mores about marriage. Whether the discussion properly reflects any movement of popular interest is an important question with regard to the present status and tendency. Also, if we could reach results with regard to the present drift of things, we might become convinced of the probable changes in the marriage institution, but more definite or far-reaching predictions about marriage would be unwise.

It will be well to begin with a restatement of the definition of the mores. When a number of men living in neighborhood have the same needs, each one of them attempts to satisfy his need as well as he can whenever it recurs. They notice each other's efforts and select the attempt which satisfies the need best with the least pain or exertion. A selection results by which one way becomes customary for all — a habit for each and a custom for the society. This way is a folkway. It has the power of a habit and custom, and is carried on by tradition. It has the character originally of an experiment. It is established by selection and approved by experience. Here then we have some reflection and some judgment: the reflection is caused by pleasure or pain, which the lowest savages experience and use for criticism; and the judgments are the most simple, consisting only in comparison of effort and satisfaction. From the reflection and judgment there arises at last an opinion as to the relation of the mode of satisfying needs to welfare. This is a moral opinion; namely, an opinion that a usage is favorable to welfare. When a folkway has this moral and reflective judgment added to it, it becomes a part of the mores. The moral inferences become wider and vaguer as they go on, but they constitute, when taken together, the best thinking men can do on human life and wisdom in it. The mores are the customs in which life is held when taken together with the moral judgments. as to the bearing of the same on welfare.

The mores, in their origin, were immediately connected with ghost fear and religion, because they came down by tradition from ancestors. This gave them the sanction of a high and vague authority from the other world and created the first notion of duty. Together these elements made up the mental life of men for ages, when they were laying the foundations of all our mental operations and forming our first mental outfit.

I use the word "folkways" for ways of doing things which have little or no moral element. The greatest

and best example is language. Language is habit and custom; its formation is made by acts of judgment, although the consideration is slight, the judgment is vague and unconscious, and the authority of tradition prevails. Uneducated people make or destroy a language, in their life, satisfying their interests and needs; expediency seems to be the highest motive. Abortion and infanticide are folkways which simply satisfy the desire to avoid care and toil. Children are a great trouble and adults try to shirk the burden; they adopt direct means to get rid of it. Religion sanctifies the acts and they become customary; then they are a law and beyond argument. In time, however, conditions change. If, for example, warriors are needed, then abortion and infanticide do not seem wise beyond question; the means of getting food may be easier, and affection has a chance to grow. Then these folkways are subjected to reflection again and a new judgment is formed, with the result that the customs are set aside by doubt and revolt. While they last they are mores, not folkways. The murder of children had a moral judgment of wisdom and right policy in it while it was practiced, and the same may be said of the custom of killing the old.

What now are some of the leading features in the mores of civilized society at the present time? Undoubtedly they are monogamy, anti-slavery, and democracy. All people now are more nervous than anybody used to be. Social ambition is great and is prevalent in all classes. The idea of class is unpopular and is not understood. There is a superstitious yearning for equality. There is a decided preference for a city life, and a stream of population from the country into big cities. These are facts of the mores of the time, and our societies are almost unanimous in their response if there is any question raised on these matters.

It is very difficult to discuss the mores; we can hardly criticise them, for they are our law of right. We are all in them, born in them, and made by them. How can we rise above them to pass judgment on them? Our mores are very different from those of the Middle Ages. Mediaeval people conceived of society under forms of status as generally as we think of it under forms of individual liberty. The mores of the Orient and the Occident differ from each other now as they apparently always have differed: the Orient is a region where time, faith, tradition, and patience rule, while the Occident forms ideals and plans and spends energy and enterprise to make new things with thoughts of progress. All details of life follow the leading ways of thought of each group. We can compare and judge ours and theirs, but independent judgment of our own, without comparison with other times or other places, is possible only within narrow limits.

Let us first take up the nervous desire and exertion which mark the men of our time in the Western civilized societies. There is a wide popular belief in what is called, progress. The masses in all civilized states strain toward success in some adopted line. Struggling and striving are passionate tendencies which take possession of groups from time to time. The newspapers, the popular literature, and the popular speakers show this current and popular tendency. This is what makes the mores. A select minority may judge otherwise, and in time their judgment may be accepted and ratified and may make the mores of another age; but the mores are always the ways of the great masses at a time and place. The French were formerly thought to be mercurial, the English sober, and the Germans phlegmatic. The Germans have become nervous; they struggle feverishly for success and preeminence; the war of 1871 and the foundation of the German Empire have made them nationally proud, and made them feel on a level with any other state. Such a change was sure to produce great changes in the mores within two or three generations. Germany now has ambition for the first place among nations; she is sensitive and suspicious, and often seems quarrelsome. The English, in the Boer War, went through crises of excitement of which it was supposed they were insusceptible. The French, burdened by debt and taxes, feel some sense of losing ground in the rank of nations, and the national party is a product of this feeling. It seems to believe that a truculent and ferocious behavior will win adherents. Perhaps it is right, in view of the nervous temper of the age — certainly the old love of moderation and sobriety in politics seems to be diminishing. The United States is stimulated by its growth and prosperity to unlimited hope and ambition. Professor Giddings^[1] thinks that he has proved statistically that the “mental ‘mode’ of the American people as a whole is ideo-emotional to dogmatical-emotional,” and that the market for books confirms this. The market for books could prove only the mental mode of that part of the public which reads books. What fraction is that? It would be most interesting and important to know. Of the

books published, Professor Giddings finds that fifty per cent. aim to please, and appeal to emotion or sentiment; forty per cent. aim to convert, and appeal to belief, ethical emotion, or self-interest; eight per cent. are critical and aim to instruct — they appeal to reason. This means that our literature is almost entirely addressed to the appetite for day-dreaming, romantic longings, and sentimentalism, to theoretical interest in crime, adventure, marital infelicity, family tragedies, and the pleasure of emotional excitement, while a large part of it turns upon ethical emotion and ignorant zeal in social matters. This literature reflects the mores and at the same time strengthens them. The people who are educated on it are trained either to Philistinism or to become the victims of suggestion. No question produced by the fall of silver could possibly be a proper political question. When it was proposed, in the United States, to make the adoption of the single silver standard a party issue and to take a vote on it, consequences were produced which were interesting for the mores. In the first place, there were interests at stake — those of the silver miners and the debtors. Interests dominate modern politics, but always more or less secretly, because it is not admitted in the mores to be right that they should dominate. Hence another pretext must be put forward to cover the interest. The best pretext is always an abstruse doctrine in the theory of public welfare. A protective tariff is never advocated because it will enable some citizens to win wealth by taxing others; it is always advocated as a prosperity policy for the country. Henry C. Carey elevated a protective tariff to a philosophy of society. When the New York courts held a law to be valid which forbade a saloon to be licensed within two hundred feet of a schoolhouse, the saloon-keepers attacked the schools as a nuisance detrimental to property.^[2] The advocates of a single silver standard put forward their proposition as a prosperity policy, and they elaborated a philosophy to serve as a major premise to it. Their ultimate philosophy was that gold is a mischief-maker to mankind, while silver is an agent of good. Obviously this is mythology, and is not capable of discussion. The silver question as a political issue was, therefore, a recent and very striking proof of the persistence in the mores of a great modern civilized state of the methods of mythology which have come down to us from prehistoric man. Mythology is in the popular mores.

There are mores corresponding to each of the great stages of the industrial organization—hunting, herding, and agricultural. When two groups which are on different stages are neighbors, or when one part of a group advances to another stage, while the remainder still practices the old form, conflicts arise. The Indian and Iranian branches of the Aryans separated under intense enmity and mutual contempt when the Iranians became tillers. All the ways of one people which conform to its industrial pursuits are an abomination to the other. The best explanation yet suggested of the statements of Caesar and Tacitus about the Germans is that the Germans were, at that period, between nomadism and settled agriculture. There is a deep contrast of mores between town and country, agriculture on the one side and manufactures, commerce, banking, etc., on the other, and this contrast may, at any time, rise to an antagonism. The antagonism is kept down if the two classes meet often; it is developed if they become strictly separated. The town looks upon the country as rustic and uncultivated; the country looks upon the town as vicious and corrupt. The industrial interests of the two are antagonistic, and one may be subjected to the other, as is always the case under a protective tariff, for the protective system never can do anything but make the stronger form of industry carry the weaker. It is a characteristic of our time that in all civilized countries the population is moving from the country to the towns. This movement is not due to the same forces in all countries. Wherever agriculture is burdened by taxes to favor manufacturing, the legislation causes, or intensifies, the movement. It is not probable that the love of luxury, excitement, social intercourse, and amusement is any greater now than it always has been, but popular literature has spread the hunger for it to classes of people who never felt it formerly. The hunger enters into the mores and becomes a characteristic of the age.

The people in the slums and tenement houses will not give up the enjoyment of the streets for any amount of rural comfort. Other classes try to help them, assuming that, to them, crowds, noise, filth, contagious diseases, and narrow quarters, must be painful. The evidence is that they like the life, and are indifferent to what others consider its evils and discomforts. They like it because it satisfies the strongest desires in the mores of our time. The people in the slums feel the same desires as those other people who have clubs, balls, visitors, the park, opera, theater, and all the other means of excitement, gossip, and entertainment which make up fashionable city life.

In Germany it is said that the country population still increases rapidly by a high birth rate.^[3] When the land is all taken up this means that there is a surplus in the rural population which goes into the wages class, and a part of it seeks the towns to become unskilled laborers or handicraftsmen. It was formerly believed that great cities consume population; that there is a waste which would produce diminution if it were not for the influx from the country. City life exercises a selection on this immigration from the country; a part of it is consumed by vice and misery and disappears; another part advances to greater social power in two or three generations; another part settles into the tenement houses and recruits the city proletariat. Nowhere in the world, perhaps, are the effects of this migration from the country to the city so strikingly apparent as in New England, for here we see farms abandoned, houses torn down, and land returning to a state of nature. Cities, however, now have a number of institutions of rescue and protection, which are believed to redeem the old destruction, so that cities do not, nowadays, consume population. The migration affects the mores of both the rural and the urban population. Their ideas, standards, ways of looking at things, ambitions, appetites, concepts of right and wrong, and their judgments on all the policy of life are affected by the efflux and reflux between town and country.

One of the most noteworthy and far-reaching features in modern mores is the unwillingness to recognize a vow or to enforce a vow by any civil or ecclesiastical process, although vows have the full authority of Scripture.^[4] It is by the mores that vows have been judged wrong, and if they are made, neglect to fulfill them is regarded with indifference. In modern mores it is allowed that a man may change his mind as long as he lives. This view is produced by the doctrine of liberty. At the most he may incur liability for damages, if his vow causes damage to somebody else. The marriage vow is the only one which remains in our mores, and no doubt the leniency of divorce has been largely due to the unwillingness to enforce a vow by which it may appear later that one's life career has been injured. It does not at all lie in the mores to give the vow prominence as the aspect of marriage which determines what it is. On the contrary, the wedding ceremony is a striking case of ritual, since people attach importance to the ceremony, not to the rational sense of what is said and done.

The mores of the latter half of the nineteenth century were marked by the decline of the dominion of the classical culture which had prevailed since the Renaissance. In art this was marked by a return to nature as the only model and an abandonment of the classical models. In architecture it was marked by a revival of Gothic and Renaissance forms, but with a wide eclecticism, the outcome of which is not yet reached. In religion two tendencies were developed, one to medievalism, the other to agnosticism. What was most important for the mores was the toleration of each other, with which these opposite tendencies in religion existed side by side. Militant infidelity, or religion, was regarded as bad form, and heresy hunting became ridiculous. The popular philosophy became realistic, and the tests of value which were accepted were more and more frankly commercial; "ideal good" lost esteem and "material good" controlled. This was nothing new in the history of mankind, but the opportunities of wealth, comfort, and luxury never before were offered to the whole of a society in any such manner and degree, and the utilities of wealth for all purposes of mankind never were so obvious and immediate. The classical culture and the religious philosophy had offered ideals which were no longer highly valued, and the way was clear for the dominion of materialistic standards and ideals. They spread everywhere, in spite of all protests and denials. The state won greatly in importance, and political institutions extended their operations over the field of the mores. Political institutions took the place of ecclesiastical institutions as adjuncts of the economic struggle for existence. The eighteenth century had bequeathed to the nineteenth a great mass of abstract notions about rights and about the ultimate notions of political philosophy, and in the nineteenth century many of these notions were reduced to actuality in constitutions, laws, and judicial rulings. The masses in all civilized nations were led to believe that their welfare could be obtained by dogmatic propositions if such propositions were enacted into constitutions and laws. This faith has entered into the mores of all civilized men and now rules their discussion of social questions. Rights, justice, liberty, and equality are the watchwords instead of the church, faith, heaven, and hell. The amount of superstition is not much changed, but it now attaches to politics, not to religion.

The grand controlling fact in modern society is that the earth is underpopulated on the existing stage of the arts. As a consequence men are in demand. The human race is going through a period of

enlargement with ease and comfort; accordingly a philosophy of optimism prevails, and the world-beatifiers reign in philosophy. Since, as a fact, the struggle for existence and competition of life are not severe, the philosophy prevails that so they always ought to be. An ethical ideal is carried into nature. It is a fact that the great masses of the human race get on very well with a minimum of education, for the conditions favor most, proportionately, those who are worst off—the unskilled laborers. Hence we find it preached as a doctrine that men, if in crowds, know the truth, feel virtuously, and act wisely by intuition, without education or training.

All modern economic developments have tended to level classes and ranks, and therefore to create democracy, and to throw political power into the hands of the most numerous class; the courtiers of power, therefore, turn to the masses with the same flattery and servility which they used to pay to kings, prelates, and nobles. At every boundary line at which the interests of individuals or groups meet in the competition of life, there is strife and friction, and at all such points there are rights which are in the mores or the laws and which have been produced by the need to solve the collisions of power and interest in peace. There is, therefore, always another resource for the party which has been defeated in the competition of life; they can appeal to rights and fight over again, on the political domain, what they have lost on the economic domain. Inasmuch as the masses cannot win on the economic domain because their opponents, though few in number, have talent, knowledge, craft, and capital, and inasmuch as the masses have political power, this appeal from the field of economic effort to that of politics is characteristic of the age. It now gives form and color to both the economic and political effort, and it is dominating all the mores which have to do with either. The master of industry dare not neglect political power; the statesman cannot maintain an independent footing against capitalistic interest. Primarily, we see a war between plutocracy and democracy. Secondarily, we see a combination of the two loom up in the future—the apostles of socialism, state socialism, municipalization, etc., are all working for it. In the combination the strongest element will rule, and the strongest element is capital. The defeat and decline of the Democratic political party in the United States within forty years, its incompetence as an opposition party, its chase after any captivating issue, its evolution into populism, coupled with administrative folly, the fear and distrust which it has consequently inspired in all who have anything, so that they turn to the ruling party for security at the sacrifice of everything else, the more and more complete surrender, at the same time, of the Republican party to the character of a conspiracy to hold power and use it for plutocratic ends, are phenomena already observable of the coming consolidation of political and monetary power. The more industrial and pecuniary functions are confided to the State or city, the more rapidly will this result be brought about. The place to watch to see whether the result will be arrested or not is in the mores. Do the people show strong political sense? Do they show real insight into their own institutions and the spirit of the same, so that they cannot be deceived by political fallacies? Do they resist the allurements of glory and cling to the genuine forces which make for national health and strength? Are they cynical about political corruption, or honestly outraged by it? Is their world-philosophy ignoble? Do they resist a steal because it is a steal or because they are not in it? Are they captivated by appeals to national vanity or do they turn aside from such appeals with contempt? These are the questions which decide the trend of institutions and the destiny of states, and the answer to them must be sought in the mores.

Parties formed on interests invent dogmas which will serve as major premises for the especial inferences which will suit their purpose. These are the “great principles” of history which are always preached as eternal and immutable. John of Salisbury, the friend of Thomas a Becket, taking part in the quarrel of the prelate with the king, which really was a quarrel of the Roman law concept of the State with the Church, developed, in his *Polycraticus*, notions of the sovereignty of the people and of republican self-government. Guelphs argued the sovereignty of the people to get the alliance of the middle class against the emperor, in Italy; while Ghibellines used the same argument to get the alliance of the middle class against the popes, in Germany.^[5] St. Augustine thought that the State was due to sin, while Gregory VII said that it was the work of the devil. This was in order to exalt the Church. The “two sword” doctrine^[6] furnished a dogmatic basis for mediaeval society: Pope and Emperor side by side, with the Pope above. The Church was due to God, the State was a human invention. Hence arose the doctrine that the State was based on a contract between ruler and ruled, and the inference that tyrannicide was justifiable, an inference which was so frequently put into practice in the sixteenth

century that its fallacy was demonstrated. Any ruler of whose acts anybody disapproved was a tyrant. Then the doctrine of contract was changed into the later "social compact" of the democratic republican form with natural rights, which ran from Grotius to Rousseau. This doctrine was used by Mariana and other Jesuits against the absolute kings (at first, of Spain); it was thoroughly destructive of the mediaeval doctrines of political authority and of rights.

When the Americans, in 1776, revolted against the colonial policy of England, they found a great number of principles afloat, and had great trouble to select the one which would suit their purpose without suggesting other inferences which would be unwelcome. The first paragraph of the Declaration of Independence contains a number of these great principles which were supposed to be axioms of political philosophy. In 1898, when we forced our rule on the Philippine Islands, some of these principles were very inconvenient. In time we shall have to drop others of them. There are no dogmatic propositions of political philosophy which are universally and always true; there are views which prevail, at a time, for a while, and then fade away and give place to other views. Each set of views colors the mores of a period. The eighteenth century notions about equality, natural rights, classes, etc., produced nineteenth century states and legislation, all strongly humanitarian in faith and temper; at the present time the eighteenth century notions are disappearing, and the mores of the twentieth century will not be tinged by humanitarianism as those of the last hundred years have been, If the State should act on ideas of every man's duty, instead of on notions of natural rights, evidently institutions and usages would undergo a great transformation.

While the views of rights are thus afloat on the tide of interest and carry with them, in the ebb and flow, a great mass of corollaries, it does not appear that the doctrine and institutions of constitutional government are being more thoroughly understood or more firmly established. Yet constitutional government is the guarantee of interests and welfare. It is a product of experience; it contains institutions by which collisions of interest can be adjusted and rights can be secured. Yet it does not offer many definitions or dogmatic statements about rights and interests. If men turn from the institutions and put faith in abstract propositions, evidently the chances of welfare will be greatly changed. At the present time constitutional institutions are the great reliance for rights and justice and the great ground of hope and confidence in the future. Nevertheless, constitutional government can never overcome the mores. We have plenty of cases of experiment to prove that constitutional institutions of the best type fall into corruption and decay unless the virtues of political self-control exist in high vigor and purity in the mores of the society.

We see, then, in the status and outlook of the present time, these facts: underpopulation of the globe and increasing control of natural forces give easier conditions for the struggle for existence. This means the most to those who have inherited the least. It is, however, obviously a temporary advantage, for the human race will, in a few generations, find itself face to face with overpopulation and harder conditions. In the meantime philosophies and notions win general acceptance which are relatively true in the exceptional period. They are broadly stated and confidently accepted in the mores and in legislation. Rights are changed in popular opinion and in constitutions, and the location of political power is shifted, especially as between classes; notions about property, marriage, family, inheritance, and so on, change to suit facts and faiths about the struggle for existence. Then groups and parties will form and war will occur between them. Great dogmas will be put forth at all stages of these movements and appropriate watchwords will never be wanting.

[1] *Psychological Review*, VIII, 337.

[2] Riis, J. A.: *The Battle with the Slum*, 336.

[3] Ammon, O.: *Die Gesellschaftsordnung und ihre natürlichen Grundlagen*, 94.

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[4] Deut. xxiii, 21.

[5] Betzold, F. von: Die Lehre von der Volkssouveränität während des Mittel-Alters, in Sybel's Zeitschrift, XXXVI, 313.

[6] Luke 22:38.

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