Ideas that Did Not Migrate from America to Europe

It was a happy thought for the Program Committee of the Association to plan a session under the magnificently simple title, "Europe and America." The subject is certainly general enough, and this is all in its favor, for general questions are important ones, and in any case a few reflections on Europe and America may provide a restful interlude in the shop talk and the hearing of specialized papers which is the usual business of the Convention. Some bounds are set to the subject by its being made a consideration of ideas, and in particular the exchange of ideas. By an ingenious twist, however, the Committee has ordained that we shall discuss ideas that were not exchanged, those whose peculiarity is that they failed to migrate. I am very much in favor of the subject, and of all such historical conundrums, but I am a little embarrassed at being the person to deal with

1 A paper read at the 1938 meeting of the American Historical Association at Chicago. At the session called "Europe and America" two papers were delivered, one on "Ideas that did not migrate from England to America," by Professor F. J. Klingberg of the University of California, and a companion piece, which is here printed as read, except for some changes in a few sentences.
it. Frankly, "Europe and America" is not my "field," and what I have to say is therefore unofficial. Indeed, on a subject which to be considered thoroughly would require an exhaustive knowledge of two continents few men are qualified to speak with professional authority. I speak, therefore, largely as a citizen, claiming that right to which we all appeal when we venture into statements that cannot be fortified with footnotes.

There is something negative and elusive about "ideas that did not migrate from America to Europe." Let us put the question in positive form: What are the ideas peculiar to America, making its civilization different from that of Europe? Of these many can be dismissed at the outset, for many of our most characteristic ideas have been successfully exported. They are mostly the practical ideas, those that can be definitely learned and embodied in a piece of work—American mass production, movies, jazz, dentistry, or the short story as developed by Poe, or the free verse of Walt Whitman. The ideas that do not migrate are likely to be either peculiarities due to local conditions, like our habit of drinking ice-water and eating corn on the cob, or the intangibles that cannot be transmitted readily, the attitudes and beliefs that distinguish one people from another.

There are many of these attitudes in America, and it is hard to find one that goes deeper than the others. But I think, and as a student of European history it perhaps comes to me the more forcibly, that our most profound difference from Europeans is our sense of living in a new world. America is the New World—that is the primary relation in which it stands to Europe, and the place it fills in the larger unit of western civilization. Its function has been to give those who went to it a fresh start. It is the white man's second chance, the land of the perpetual new deal. This fact has shaped all American development, and the consciousness of it has modified American ideas, making even the things that we share with Europe, such as democracy or machine industry, vastly different from their Old World counterparts.

If, as I believe, the United States is a New World in a wider sense than other colonial areas of European culture, the reason is not to be looked for in geography alone. There is also a historical reason, the fact—perhaps the accident—that the United States took form at a notable moment in human affairs, the age of the revolutionary bour-
geoisie, the century or two before the American Civil War. The course of thought in this period ran to the glorification of new beginnings. The ideal type of man, for liberal thinkers throughout the Atlantic world, was the free-standing individual, the man who owed nothing to custom or preconception, man in the state of nature as some philosophers said, and at any rate the man who put aside the past as a burden, and regarded old ideas as most probably mistaken. "Truth," said Condorcet of the Americans, "is easy to find for a new-born people without prejudices." It was an optimistic philosophy, asserting the goodness of the free and unconditioned man. It was shared in America, where we have usually felt that the mere act of discarding what is old is a step in the right direction. Ours is perhaps the only country where even the reactionaries believe in progress.

If this country is really the New World, if it is really man's second chance, or at least the white man's second chance, then to live in it implies a special responsibility. Its people have a case to prove. They must show what men can do when old trammels are shaken off. So has arisen another American idea, the belief of Americans that they are charged with a mission, that their development is eagerly watched by an expectant world, that their experience contains a lesson for all mankind. This belief is almost as old as settlement in the United States. The Puritans brought it with them to Massachusetts. Disembarking on a bleak and savage coast, separated by two months' voyage from the Europe of the Thirty Years War, exiled, isolated and forlorn, they listened to an address by their leader, John Winthrop. "For we must consider," he said, "that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all peoples are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world." The words are now carved on the Tercentenary Monument on Boston Common.

In 1630 such a sentiment had little support from external facts. Hardly anyone then much cared what happened in North America. But the idea of having a mission, originating in religious faith, was confirmed in later days by the philosophy of liberty. It spread to other Americans than the Puritans; it was acknowledged in Europe as true. The mission in its widest sense was simply the mission of youth, the task of showing what a New World could be. A good statement of it
was made by St. John de Crèvecoeur, a Frenchman who lived twenty-seven years in America. "It is probable," he said in 1784, in the French version of his famous *Letters from an American Farmer*, "that this continent will some day become the theatre where the springs of the human spirit, left to themselves, will acquire all the force of which they are susceptible, the theatre where human nature, so long cramped, so long held down to the size of pygmies, will perhaps receive its last and greatest honors." This is an American idea, it may be the supreme American idea, idealized and put in eighteenth-century form, but still a perennial American hope, which Europeans may understand from afar, but which cannot really migrate to Europe, because it can only live in the New World.

In particular, as we all know, the mission of America has been to demonstrate democracy. Let me quote again from a Frenchman, Mirabeau, from a work written a few months before the Revolution of which he became a leader. "No, no," he said, "men have not yet solved this problem: whether it is possible so to constitute a government that justice and the common good are everywhere respected without the necessity, to prevent disorder, of submission to an imbecile. The human race puts this great question to the United States of America, and if by chance they should answer badly it would be necessary to ask it again of Reason." Innumerable other European liberals might be quoted to the same effect. So long as liberalism meant chiefly self-government and individual rights the United States stood forth as its most splendid and preeminent example. At no other time did Americans feel their mission so intensely, or Europeans so willingly acknowledge it. Turgot called the Americans the hope of the human race; Robert Burns praised them for asserting the royalty of man; an obscure German wrote a poem of which one stanza may be freely translated:

And man became again man; and many heroes
Planted with eager hands the seeds of truth.
Far on the banks of Philadelphia's waters
Gleamed the bright morning.

The enthusiasm of a hundred years was summed up in the calm simplicity of Lincoln, when, after the battle of Gettysburg, he declared that the war was to test whether this nation, "or any nation so conceived," could long endure.
In time Europe came to have governments that we call democratic, and so to follow in the way set by the United States, but some of the most characteristic American political institutions struck no lasting roots abroad. Primary elections, the rotation of offices, the popular election of judges are examples. More important, being more of a principle, is the idea of a constitution that limits and divides the powers of government, and of a supreme court to determine and annul acts deviating from the organic law. In the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, article XVI, the French affirmed that any society without a separation of powers had no constitution. I suspect that they got this idea from the Americans, whose state and federal constitutions they had been reading for eleven years, more than from Montesquieu, in whose *Spirit of Laws* it is only briefly and hazily sketched. But it cannot be said to have migrated successfully, for not long after 1789 the power in France was in the hands of the administration, where for the most part it has remained ever since. The French Republic of 1848 was planned on American lines; a strong presidency was set up, which, however, in the hands of a Bonaparte, soon passed into dictatorship. Federalism, the division of power between central and outlying authorities, may also be called an American idea, for the United States, though not the first, has been the most eminent of its practitioners. The idea, deriving prestige from its success in the United States, has been taken up by the British Dominions. For the fifty years before 1918 it was used in modified form in the German and Austrian empires, but in Austria the outlying parts could not tolerate the center, and in Germany under the present regime the center has destroyed the component states. Federalism did not successfully migrate to Europe. It remains to be seen how far federalism, or our other forms of the division of power, can survive in this country the forces that cut them short in Europe—the demand for national integration, strong government, and more immediate expression of the sovereign will.

Political machinery, however, is the house in which democracy lives. The idea of equality is the living democracy itself. Alexis de Tocqueville, a hundred years ago, thought that political democracy in America was practical, peaceable and safe because the Americans were economically nearly equal. In his time much economic equality did exist. But even when Americans were relatively equal in wealth
and position it was more from circumstance than from choice. Such equality has not been the usual national goal. Our idea has resembled the French conception of careers open to talent. At the same time, it has features that have never migrated to Europe, or been independently produced there.

It is well to note, before going further, that we have also our own kind of inequalities. More than twelve million Americans are Negroes. The proportion of black Americans to white has always been at least one in ten. These people labor under a kind of discrimination that Europe has not known—at least until recently. Of the other nine tenths of the population, some come from many generations born in this country, some arrived in person only yesterday. Some still bear the marks of their national origin. I well remember, as a child growing up in Chicago, with what distrust and vague distaste the word "foreigners" was pronounced by my elders, and, when I heard about "immigrants" in school, what a remote horde I thought they were. Yet the people so described were customary residents, and usually citizens, of Chicago. I saw them every day. Elements of social distance exist here which have no counterpart in the more homogeneous nations of Europe, and which some observers like Paul Bourget or André Siegfried, or Louis Adamic among Americans, have studied with particular attention. There are subtle repugnances and attitudes of superiority which are usually unspoken, but which come to the surface in times of stress, as in the delusion that radicals are usually foreigners, and foreigners, as like as not, dangerous radicals. Probably also, the lack of sympathy with which the comfortable classes have looked upon the mass of unskilled workers is due in large part to the feeling that they are not really Americans.

Nevertheless, equality, not inequality, is the important idea and avowed doctrine of the United States. Ours is an equality suited to a new world. It is the equality of men who, like the country itself, are on the make. In our political lore every man is supposed to have an equal chance. We all start equal, but would be much embarrassed if we all ended equal too. We would think that in our own lives we had made no progress, and that the progress of the nation was seriously in doubt. Our real interest is in getting ahead. We are running a race, partly with ourselves to see how far we can go beyond the position
in which we began, and in large measure with our neighbors, to see how far we can become more than merely their equals. We want to make something of ourselves, to use a telling American phrase. And for the self-made man it is a source of deep gratification, as he surveys his career, to reflect that he and John Doe, who has never amounted to anything, were created equal.

American equality surely has its ironic side, but it is still one of the great ideas of the world. During most of its history the United States has embodied, no doubt imperfectly, but better than Europe, the French conception of careers open to talent, with rank and privilege counting for nothing, and the soaring philosophy of the age of romantic liberty, when a man was urged to pit himself sublimely against the universe. The straining of countless individuals has civilized a continent in hardly more than a hundred years. The desire for self-improvement, for getting ahead, has produced schools with a lavishness unknown elsewhere, so that our attitude to education is itself an idea that has not migrated to Europe. From the same source comes a peculiar American vagary, “psychology” in quotation marks, the kind advertised in magazines, which teaches a person how to be a success. And not the least valuable product of our equality, characteristic of America if not of all individual Americans, is a certain familiarity between persons differently placed, a habit of hobnobbing without deference or condescension, the reverse of the snobbishness, or servility, or self-conscious equalitarianism of Europe. Where but in America do taxi-drivers ask whether you want to ride in the front seat, and where else does the rider accept as the natural thing to do? Such is the practice in some Indiana towns that I know of. It presupposes an attitude in which there is neither discontent nor suspicion. This attitude disappears when, and where, differences of fortune become wider, more hereditary, more publicly displayed, and class consciousness correspondingly more acute.

With equality must be noted also what in its best form is our belief in the dignity of work, and, in its worst, the hustle and bustle which foreign observers have thought distinctively American. The ordinary American is inherently suspicious of leisure, other than the rest that makes him more efficient in his business. Our men of wealth are popularly admired for regularity in their offices. We of the academic
profession often feel called upon to explain the length of our vacations. As a people we are all supposed to be working practically all the time. In our ideal image of ourselves we have no place for a leisure class. The wives and daughters of the rich may indeed be idle without public opprobrium, but foreigners tell us that we spoil our women anyway, and in any case the men are always in the thick of affairs. Work in America has never carried a stigma. No American ever apologizes for having to earn his living.

But the importance set upon work leads to a paradox. A college boy may stoke furnaces and wait on tables, his professors may shine their own shoes and their wives wash dishes without losing caste. Americans see no indignity in such tasks, so long as they are merely tasks, and not permanent occupations. Real furnace men, waiters, bootblacks and housemaids do not enjoy much prestige among us. For in the flux of American life, where the individual has been relatively independent of class and family, his position is determined very largely by the work he does. If a farmer’s son becomes a doctor, then he is accepted as a professional man without more ado, and not thought of, as he might be even in democratic France, as primarily a peasant’s son. We should like to believe, being an idealistic people, that differences of income are the outward proof of differences in the value of our work. All this complex of ideas is pleasant for the prosperous, but discouraging for the poor. Believing traditionally that the individual makes himself, Americans do not easily grant that there is a definite laboring class. Believing traditionally that a man’s work is the best index to his worth, they are likely to be impatient of those who do heavy labor, thinking that they hardly deserve anything else. Seeing income as a result of achievement, and wealth as a sign of usefulness to society, they are likely to regard poverty not as an objective fact, nor even as a misfortune, but as a sign of fault. In addition, old and settled Americans generally think of laborers in the mines and steel mills as hardly Americans at all. And when we consider that these ideas are not those of a ruling class, as the Marxists would have it, but that they permeate our whole society, shaping the feelings with which every level of occupation regards the ones below it, it is easy to understand why we have had no such working-class movement as has taken place in Europe.
Conversely, the enterprising and the successful—pushers and climbers a European might call them—have been highly respected and amply rewarded in America. It has been thought that their interests were the same as those of the public at large, an idea that dates from the French and British philosophy of the eighteenth century, but which has nowhere been so widely conceded or so successfully applied as in the United States. The dominance of the business man is one of our most notable peculiarities. Nowhere else would a whole people be asked to believe that “what helps business helps you.” Nowhere else does the word business have quite the same connotation, a mixture of leadership, patriotism, weighty responsibility and colossal operations.

Tycoons of business, like great scientists and a few revolutionaries now safely defunct, have been thought to lead in the march of progress, and the belief in progress and the gospel of work, according to George Santayana, constitute our national faith and morality. This idea of progress is different from that of Europe. It is more intense, less bookish and historical, oriented more to the future and less to the past. It is more attached to familiar things, and planted deeper in the average man’s mind. It appears, for example, in the attitude of the community booster, where it is a form of the national urge to self improvement. “Keep Chicago ahead” used to be the slogan of one of the newspapers here. Try to imagine the same of any foreign city of similar size: “keep Paris ahead,” for example. The result is fantastic, for the idea is an American one, revealing that American life is a race in which it would be unworthy not to go forward. If a man buys a piece of land and doubles his money in three years (an example perhaps now purely historical), he attributes his profit to progress and pockets it with the greatest satisfaction. If a symphony orchestra is organized in this city, that too is progress; and the symphony will be applauded as a civic achievement by thousands who have no ear for music. Faster airplanes are of course greeted with pride; so were railroads in their day; and so, further back, were such elementary necessities as passable roads. Progress for the American has been a living experience, not a theory; for his world until very recently has been obviously and undeniably expanding. The faith may sometimes be naïve, but it is founded on fact; it may be travestied orcheapened,
but it is nevertheless a genuine ideal. It was expressed by Whitman as well as anyone in his poem "O Pioneers!"

Have the elder races halted?
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

All the past we leave behind,
We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and of march,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

At this point, did time permit, it would not be difficult to speak of American self-righteousness or of the philosophy of isolation. Something might be said of the American idea of war and peace, for although we have engaged in as many wars as most people we believe ourselves pacific, and cannot imagine what it is, except malice or stupidity, that makes Europeans fight. I have mentioned only the shortcomings of our idea of the melting-pot, the belief that in America old nationalities are fused into a new one, though this is one of the most valuable of ideas that have not migrated to Europe, and one that we might earnestly wish were practicable there. I have said nothing of our modern divinity, the Standard of Living, nothing of our preoccupation with comfort, nothing of that exceptional materialism of which disgruntled critics have accused us, and in which I do not believe, holding rather with Santayana that an American is an idealist working with matter.

It may be that much of what I have said is already out of date, that the ideas I have chosen to emphasize are no longer the driving ideas of the United States. I am afraid that this may be true, and that it accounts for much of our perplexity today. Our tradition is somewhat out of joint with the times. Our historic conception of equality has led to inequalities as great, if not as galling, as those which produced the French Revolution. High respecters of work, we face the mockery of unemployment, and are told that we must learn to cultivate leisure. The old belief in the competence of business to meet our problems single-handed is undermined. Any mention of progress is likely to draw an ironic rejoinder. Millions of our citizens have become the dependents of a government which in a democracy they are supposed disinterestedly to guide.
The bewilderment is the greater because America was so long the exemplar of everything progressive. In the formative period of our history we were applauded and extolled by the radicals of Europe, showered with praises which no Fourth of July orator could outdo, and the experience undoubtedly strengthened the tendency to which we were subject in any case, a tendency to self-congratulation, moral superiority in the face of Europe, and extreme confidence in our own institutions. Some of the ideas for which we were eulogized—limited and divided government, individual liberty from control, equality of the kind between participants in a race—are among those which proponents of new systems now view with suspicion. It is to be hoped that as we meet the demands of the new age the older ideas of the United States may save us from the fate which is overtaking Europe. Let us remember that, though the frontier is gone and we are no longer as young as we once were, we still live in the New World.

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