The Attack On LEVIATHAN

Regionalism and Nationalism in the UNITED STATES

One law for the lion and ox is oppression
—WILLIAM BLAKE

By DONALD DAVIDSON

1938
Chapel Hill
THE UNIVERSITY
of North Carolina
PRESS

Printed in the United States of America
Van Rees Press · New York

PREFACE

THIS BOOK is a series of essays and informal studies grouped around a general theme. It does not pretend to be a systematic and definitive consideration of sectionalism and regionalism in the United States. To deal adequately with that subject would require a lifetime of travel and investigation and would call for a combination of special skills, particularly in history and other branches of social science, such as I cannot claim to possess, great though my interest and assiduous my reading in those fields may have been. I can claim only the layman's right to judge warring interpretations of American life and history, to set them beside the reality of experience, immediate or remembered, and then to choose for himself whom his soul will believe. That right, troublesome though it may be to authority, and upon occasion embarrassing even to the individual who claims it, is itself a cardinal American principle, always worth maintaining. With a freedom, therefore, that I might have been less bold to exercise under different circumstances, I have ranged here and there among experts of various degrees and specialties, asking continually whether this monograph, or that survey, or this newspaper article, or that book, can be trusted in its description of what goes on in the United States or in its prognostication of what ought to be and will be. When these agencies are discovered in the act of arranging such intimate matters as one's income tax, or the education of one's children, or the veritable root and stock of his life, it is time for the layman to put aside his awe and ask whether these people really know what they are talking

about, or whether they are, after all, not divine, but perhaps as fallibly human as oneself.

In thus ranging I have often become indebted to the very writers whose views I would at some points criticize; and my exploration of the general subject is at times patently and deliberately a restatement in layman's terms of what experts and authorities have had to say. Such a review seems the more appropriate because the works of specialists, though enormously influential, are not always widely read, are seldom brought into their related place in a general discussion, and therefore often escape judgment until they have already taken effective form in society. The completeness with which I have presented their views will be taken, I trust, not only as an acknowledgment of obvious indebtedness, but as an indication of my respect for their serious and able devotion to their tasks, and will clear me of any charge of wanton disrespect for learning.

Some of the essays here grouped together were written and published in periodicals at intervals during the five years from 1932 to 1937. All of these have undergone some revision; in a few cases they have been expanded. However, rather than undertake a drastic revision that would make such essays chapters in a consecutive and closely unified study, I have chosen to let them stand in substance as they were, even at the cost of some repetition. The rest of the book—about one third—is entirely new, and has been added to round out consideration of the subject. The incompleteness of consideration, even yet, will be evident enough. I particularly regret the lack of any very extensive and adequate discussion of the Far West. But I did not dare to presume too much upon an experience of the United States which, though it has taken me far and wide through the eastern half of the country, has carried me little further west than the eastern edge of the Great Plains.

I wish to acknowledge my very great indebtedness to those who have aided me in these years, not only in material ways but by precept and example: to John Donald Wade and Mrs. Ida Frederick Wade of Georgia, under whose kindly and hospitable roof the writing of these essays began; to Stark Young, for invaluable assistance; to Frank L. Owsley and Allen Tate, for long and steadfast encouragement and helpful suggestions; to Seward Collins, editor of *The American Review,* without whose active interest a great many of these essays might never have seen the light; to Mr. and Mrs. John Murph of Georgia; to the late Homer Noble and Mrs. Eunice Noble of Vermont; to Lucia B. Merrielees of Montana; to James Southall Wilson of Virginia; to Mr. and Mrs. F. A. Sherrer of Ohio, from whom I have learned more of the Old Northwest than books can tell; and most of all to my wife, Theresa Sherrer Davidson.

I wish to express my thanks to *The American Review* for permission to reprint those essays which originally appeared in its columns; and to *The Southern Review, Poetry, a Magazine of Verse,* and *The Hound and Horn* for a similar courtesy. The essay now entitled "Federation or Disunion" is a revised form of an essay entitled "That the Nation May Endure," which appeared in *Who Owns America?* It is reprinted by special permission of and arrangement with Houghton Mifflin Company, authorized publishers of *Who Owns America?*

D. D.

Vanderbilt University
Nashville, Tennessee
September, 1937

CONTENTS

Southern Essays

The World State

THE NATION WE ARE

I. The Diversity of America

In Charles A. Beard's popular history, *The Rise of American Civilization,* are frequent bits of irony and sarcasm that remind us of another great historian, one of the first who chose to make history the study of a social organism rather than a mere chronology. Gibbon's way, Byron said, was to sap a solemn creed with a solemn sneer. Beard's irony is not solemn; rather it is a confident levity, that breaks out into covert witticism whenever the formal professions of statesmen and parties are seen, in the brazen after-light of economic determinism, to be in patent conflict with supposed realities. Writing of the early debates over strict and liberal interpretations of the Constitution, Beard says:

> If some of the minor politicians thought their linguistic pattern flowered inexorably from unanswerable premises, there is no doubt that the first thinkers who sat at the loom weaving the texture of constitutional theory, knew what and how they were designing. It remained for smaller men to treat Federal jurisprudence as one of America's Eleusinian mysteries.

Linguistic pattern! It is one of Beard's favorite metaphors, and he returns to it again and again, always with the implication that the purpose of a linguistic pattern in the mouth of an American politician or even in a document of state is to disguise reality.

Let the historian have his moment of jocosity. We can join in the laughter until we reflect that there are all kinds

of linguistic patterns and that some, not to be despised, reveal truths which the formal historian has been too prone to pass by. If Beard had looked a little further, he might have discovered that certain other realities of American history are not hidden but are rather openly and honestly disclosed in the familiar vocabulary, or linguistic pattern, of the American people.

There is, for example, the unrecognized reality of sectionalism—or, as some would have it, regionalism—and its actual role in the national being of the American people. If the vocabulary of the people rather than the solemn protestations and documentations of statesmen be consulted as evidence, there has never been a time in the history of the Republic when Americans were unwilling to acknowledge sectionalism as an effective reality, amounting almost to a commonplace, to be accepted and dealt with entirely aside from its status as a political and social problem.

Common speech is vocal where the Constitution is silent. For tendencies that assume a living form definite enough to be encountered in ordinary life must be dealt with, and, to be dealt with, must be named. So there have always been familiar designations for those roughly outlined geographic divisions that interlock within the national arrangement and overlap the state arrangement. The habitat and manners of the Yankee, the Southerner, and of all the varieties of Westerner have been known and named at all periods in our history. We have a big medicine for the nation, by which, gravely passing the calumet from hand to hand, we assure ourselves that there is no North, no South, no East, no West, except as compass or winds may indicate; and we have a little medicine for the states, performed with assurances that require nowadays a more anxious and forcible puffing than of old. But no sooner is the mystical rite performed than we resume our usual characters, and are again Americans, certainly, but

with equal certainty also Americans of this or that geographic division. The definition of the American is never quite complete until the qualification is added: *And from what section of the country?*

Our devotions to the Great White Father have not, after all, stirred the Rockies from their base, or unchannelled the Mississippi, or removed the plains, the lakes, the climate itself. Nor have any devotions, aspirations, or mechanisms changed the American past, though they may have altered much else. It still remains a fact that the Puritans settled in New England and men of a different persuasion in Virginia; the Scandinavians went one way, the Scotch-Irish, the Huguenots, the African slave went another way. Gold was discovered in California, not in Tennessee. The Hartford Convention, the Texan Revolution, the War Between the States, the march of the Robber Barons, the growth of Wall Street are all realities which have taken a sectional form. If all the diverse elements that went into the peopling and making of America had been diffused more uniformly, or had spread over a more uniform physiographic area, or even had concentrated within bounds as narrow as England or France, the tale might have been different. But it did not happen so. There is no escape from the fact that the American nation is spread over a continental area, and that in the spreading process it has established local concentrations which have geographic bounds.

At this point we come upon a contradiction which has not always been welcome company to those who would make a party platform, or advocate a Federal statute, or vend a commodity, or carry a religious doctrine, or plan a national economy, or perform any act claiming to have merit and application throughout the whole area of the United States. How does one legislate for the nation as a whole? What is the whole nation? What is the national interest? The govern-

ment which is supposed to be national and which is charged with administering to the benefit of all citizens equally is an exceedingly abstract device. Its principle, defined in a written instrument which at points is more negative than positive, has to do with the federation of states, and the states themselves are likewise abstractly conceived, and are laid out, to a remarkable degree, in geometric rather than geographic patterns. The states and the Federal government represent conceptions or organizations rather than organisms. The government (or governments) cannot take formal notice, is in fact specifically forbidden in certain instances to take formal notice, of the actual geographic divisions—the sections or regions. The real and concrete thing does not express itself overtly in the abstract conception. The organizations do not coincide with the organisms. We are a federation of states; but we are a nation of sections. The unwritten constitution of that nation is a sectional constitution as apparent in folkways and political predilections as it is *not* apparent in the written document.

In all the 160-odd years of our history as a Republic this contradiction has existed without our ever drawing up a single really practical device for dealing with the problems which it created. We have, in fact, never really attempted to deal with it. The whole subject has long been taboo, among historians and statesmen alike, as if the existence of sections constituted a skeleton in the closet, which could not be brought to view without the most scandalous and violent results. There have been good reasons for this avoidance of an important issue, and there have been some reasons, effective enough, which cannot be called good. Of the various good reasons for public avoidance of the issue it is necessary for the moment to mention only one—an obvious reason. In the early days of the Republic the establishment and preservation of the national government was the *sine qua non* of

all policies, whether domestic or foreign. To have a national government working practically at home and to present a united front abroad to European powers waiting for any favorable opportunity to dismember and devour the bantling Independence—those were concerns that necessarily took precedence over all else. Although, even before the turn of the nineteenth century, there were definitely established sections—a New England, a Middle States, a South, and the first indications of a West—the considerations that they forced upon national attention were a matter to be hushed up and managed behind the scenes. From such original circumstances, sectionalism received a stigma which has never been erased. And so, even in dictionaries of the year 1936, the term sectionalism is defined, with a Johnsonian fillip, as "devotion, especially disproportionate, to the interests peculiar to a section of the country; sectional feeling, prejudice, etc." Then the dictionary notes, more realistically and appropriately, that the word is peculiar to the United States. It is not an Anglicism.

In the day of the nation's maturity, that definition can be altered without danger to the Republic. There is, in fact, more danger in leaving it unaltered than in seeking the way by which the fatal qualifications "disproportionate" and "prejudiced" may be removed. Those who held, sincerely or not, that sectionalism necessarily involved a dangerous or even treacherous devotion and a narrow prejudice looked forward to a time when all sectional differences, or at least all troublesome sectional differences, would be removed by some welding and unifying process that would work complete harmony where there had once been frequent and annoying discord. If nothing else would do the job, the industrial revolution, in its massiveness and energy, would certainly do it, perhaps in less time than older Americans could have conceived, perhaps in that glorious twinkling of an eye which the

Saints of the Church promised as the final transformation of the most corrupt sinner. Almost the contrary has happened. By one of those paradoxes that are common in all history, and nowhere more common than in American history, the moment when American uniformity was supposed to have been finally achieved through the standardizing processes was also the moment when the sectional issue came into the light in a form that could be openly and fully discussed.

By an irony that ought to please Charles A. Beard, the identical economic forces that seemed to be making America an area of unvarying uniformity also devoted some of the fruits of their labor to the endowment of historical research. A zeal for a slow and orderly form of retrospect became a by-product of the zeal for rapid technological advance. The act may ultimately prove as important in its consequences as the preservation of Greek culture by the Roman conqueror. At any rate, the American past is being systematically probed and analyzed as no immediate past has ever been probed before. The realistically exact history of America is now being superimposed upon the partisan and heroical tale of an earlier day. It was inevitable that the neglected function of the sections should be looked into by men who should have no interest in discrediting them or in ignoring their existence. The result is that we now have a fairly well-shaped historical theory of the place of the sections in American national life.

No doubt the emergence of this theory owes much to the accumulated labors of many minds; and above all it derives from the temper and method of a new school of historians, who are prone to make the "processes of social development" under special American conditions the guiding principle of their studies, and so are ready to consider evidence of a sort neglected by earlier schools. The complete formulation of the theory of the sections and their integral place in national

history was, nevertheless, mainly the work of one man, the late Frederick Jackson Turner.[1] He stated, what many had felt, that the sections are not vestiges from an older time, archaic and negligible, but have been and still are functions of the national life. They are real entities, not sentimental fictions: they have a place in the making of events, along with the Federal government and the state governments, although their place and power are not yet fully recognized or understood.

In Turner's theory, sectionalism is thus organic in the American establishment, but in a creative rather than a negative and destructive sense. It has grown out of the accidents and purposes that have attended the adaptation of a people, democratically inclined and originally of diverse but not unrelated European stocks and traditions, to life upon the North American continent. The history of the sections as sections has been long unwritten, and their place in the national order unexplored, because historians have fixed attention too exclusively upon the growth of the Federal organism, which they picture as dwarfing gradually the power of the states as it draws power into itself. But this bias must be altered when the historian begins, as Turner did, with the extensions of the frontier and sees how the people gather into geographic provinces, differentiated separately and fairly homogeneous within themselves, until these provinces form sections "which equal great European nations" and make the United States "a union of potential nations."

This is of course not only a new theory of American history but also suggests, by implication, a new function for the historian. The modern historian, through his natural affilia-

[1] William E. Dodd early dealt with sectionalism much as Turner did, and gave a somewhat definitive statement of the problem in such books as *Expansion and Conflict* (1911). Dodd's early writings about sectionalism antedate some of Turner's. Others, especially in the South and West, were thinking along the same lines.

tions with the sociologist, the economist, the political scientist, becomes in effect a statesman, or at least an adviser to the state in one form or another. The new conception of sectionalism has quickly found its way into the discussions and plans of the corps of experts, on the stage or behind the scenes of government, whom the modern state seems to need in the administration of its complex affairs. Who can tell what will come from such discussions and such plans? Certainly Turner's thesis is not acceptable to all who think they know what the United States ought to become. There are other theories of the national being and advocates ready to push these theories to the limit. But while a forecast of the future waits undecided, it is still true that now, for the first time, when America has its strongest central government and its most centralized economics, the problem of sectionalism is unabated and yet moves toward solution in so far as it is actually studied and not ignored. While in Europe the totalitarian state perfects a technique for controlling every action, if not every thought, of its citizens, the American government commits itself, through studies made by bureaus and committees, of how diversity may be tolerated and even encouraged. The social scientists, in solemn assembly, investigate "extra-regional controls." Regional planning commissions, for cities, states, and larger areas, are set up and begin to take on official life. The old taboo has been lifted; open and respectful consideration of sectionalism is actually under way.

But such consideration could hardly have been prompted by the issue of a single historical work, distinguished though it be. The new importance of sectionalism and regionalism in social science is only a part of a larger movement of ideas and emotions called forth by the exigencies of the times. In their most general aspect, the sectionalism and regionalism of the twentieth century are an American expression of dis-