

THE GROWTH OF AMERICAN THOUGHT

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Introduction

An account of the growth of American thought involves, in the first place, a study of the growth on American soil of *knowledge* of the physical universe, of human nature, and of social relationships. Since man's precise and tested knowledge of his environment, physical and social, and of himself has been at every point in time subject to varying limitations, he has *speculated* on that which he did not know. These speculative operations, sometimes casual, random, and entirely unorganized, have been transmitted from generation to generation as superstitions and folklore; sometimes they have been systematized as theology and philosophy. In either case such informal notions and beliefs, or organized ideas, properly belong to intellectual history. To knowledge and ideas must be added the values which men and women have held and cherished. The history of knowledge, of speculation and ideas, and of values cannot easily be traced without reference to the institutions especially concerned with making accretions to knowledge and thought and disseminating these. Thus the growth in America of schools, colleges, libraries, the press, laboratories, foundations, and research centers becomes an important condition for the growth of American thought.

Bodies of exact knowledge, patterns of thought, and all the agencies of intellectual life developed in America in relation to their counterparts in Europe. Each generation of Europeans who came to America brought prevailing or dissenting European ideas, brought in greater or less degree special intellectual techniques and the command of bodies of knowledge, brought concepts of the good and the desirable. All these played essential roles in the growth of American thought. Americans, old and new, familiarized themselves with newer intellectual currents in the Old World through travel and study abroad and through reading in the original or in translation reports of scien-

tific discoveries and emerging systems of thought. But even in the seventeenth century, and increasingly with the passage of time, Americans also contributed both knowledge and ideas to Europe.

If the history of the growth of knowledge, thought, values, and the agencies of intellectual life is not to be a mere chronicle, it is necessary to explain, as far as possible, how this growth took place. The factors that have aided and the factors that have retarded it must be considered. The status of knowledge, the tissue of thought, the cluster of values are all at any particular time affected by the physical environment and economy, polity, and social arrangements, all more or less in the process of change. Because the American environment, physical and social, differed from that of Europe, Americans, confronted by different needs and problems, adapted the European intellectual heritage in their own way. And because American life came increasingly to differ from European life, American ideas, American agencies of intellectual life, and the use made of knowledge likewise came to differ in America from their European counterparts. The interrelationships between the growth of thought and the whole social milieu seem to be so close and have been so frequently neglected that this study of American life has tried consistently to relate that growth to the whole complex environment. It is thus not a history of American thought but a social history of American thought, and to some extent a socio-economic history of American thought.

This emphasis on the relationships between developing ideas and bodies of knowledge on the one hand and other phases of American life on the other imposes certain limitations, if the account is to be encompassed in a single volume. An effort has been made throughout to describe in broad outline the nature of the dominant ideas and to indicate the major contributions made by Americans to exact knowledge. But this study does not purport to provide an exhaustive analysis of the "interiors" of the ideas and systems of thought chosen for consideration. Such analyses, in the manner of Bury's *History of the Idea of Progress* or Lovejoy's *Great Chain of Being*, would indeed be valuable, but they are not a part of the plan of this book. The emphasis chosen has also precluded a full discussion of the development of each of the intellectual disciplines in America. The study is primarily a social history of American thought.

This study of American intellectual life is organized in chronological periods according to ideas which may be thought of as characteristic of the successive eras in that history. Complex and long though the colonial era was, different though American life and thought on the eve of the Revolution were from life and thought in the seventeenth century, the colonial period nevertheless presents a certain unity. In that period Europeans adapted their heritage of thought and knowledge to the conditions of colonization and to a new physical and social environment. The heritage of Christian thought, of the polite learning of the Renaissance, and of a vast body of folklore was supplemented by that of the Enlightenment which began to make its impact on America in the seventeenth century. The next general period, extending from the rise of the Revolution to the end of the eighteenth century, was marked by the growth of the idea of Americanism. Cultural nationalism, the expanding Enlightenment, and the conservative reaction all contributed to and were in turn affected by the concept of Americanism. The first third of the nineteenth century, roughly, was marked by patrician leadership in thought. This, however, was challenged by the frontier in those decades, and the nationalism inherited from the revolutionary shift in emphasis was challenged by both cosmopolitan and regional ideas and interests. The period extending approximately from 1830 to 1850 was dominated by the democratic upheaval that profoundly affected intellectual life; this was an era in which new currents of equalitarian thought made themselves felt. This was also the golden day of progress and optimism, in which science and technology made great advances, in which knowledge was popularized, and in which patriotic and nationalistic ideas were assimilated to democratic theory.

The period extending roughly from 1850 to 1870 was marked by the triumph of nationalism and business ideology in social and political thought. The cultural regionalism of the Old South was paralleled in the decade prior to the Civil War by the intellectual defense of commerce and industry in the North, and these patterns of thought and feeling were opposed as their associated interests were in the Civil War. Appomattox was followed by an upsurge of business ideology and a new nationalism in thought and feeling.

From 1870 or thereabouts to the end of the century the dominant

idea was the assertion of individualism in a corporate age of applied science. Science advanced on supernaturalism, and evolutionary thought affected and was affected by the utilitarian ideas and interests that prevailed. At the same time the earlier democratic movement toward the popularization of knowledge continued; the corporate character of the age was reflected in the new emphasis on the professionalization of many areas and levels of intellectual life. At the same time, in the name of individualism and reform, ideas and systems of thought reflected the challenge implicit in the application of science to life, and these reform and protest ideas stimulated a counterdefense in the name of conservative interests.

In the twentieth century optimism has been subject to diversion, criticism, and contraction. The imperialistic adventure of 1898 and subsequent years and the crusade of 1917 to make the world safe for democracy were followed by disillusionment, criticism, and complacency, and then by renewed optimism in the decade of the 'twenties. But the breakdown in economy during the 'thirties eventuated in new intellectual searches, and the world crisis intensified the widespread pessimism and uncertainty.

No brief is held for the superiority of the organization of this study. With a different set of purposes a different organization would be natural. The fact that a treatment based on leading social attitudes is combined with a chronological division of the subject matter means that a particular person or group, or a given conception or attitude, is often dealt with in different connections in different parts of this book. But this is unavoidable in a work departing as this does from a strictly chronological treatment.

The problem of emphasis, of selection and rejection of materials, and that of chronology have not been the only difficulties encountered. The sources for a study of American intellectual history are abundant—formal treatises by theologians, philosophers, scientists, and social scientists; autobiographies and letters of scholars, published and unpublished; novels, tales, poems, essays, critical reviews in periodicals; records of the agencies of intellectual life, schools, colleges, foundations, learned societies, publishing houses, newspapers, and the like; collections of folklore, folk songs, ballads, and proverbs; literature written and published for the masses—these are only some of the

materials available. In some measure this study rests on such materials. But the scope of this undertaking is so vast that by necessity monographic literature bulks large. Of this there is an impressive amount, in spite of the fact that students of American history have long been primarily concerned with political, military, economic, and social activities and institutions.

Even from the start, however, intellectual interests were in some measure represented in historical writing. Edward Johnson, one of New England's first historians, included in his *Wonder-Working Providence of Zion's Saviour in New-England* (1654) an account of the founding of the churches in Massachusetts Bay and of the religious ideas and controversies that both harassed the founders and added zest to life. A half century later Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* chronicled in detail the lives of the divines, the "afflictive disturbances," and the fortunes of Harvard College. Nor did other colonies lack historians to relate intellectual interests and achievements, or the absence of them. Hugh Jones' *The Present State of Virginia* (1724) is still a valuable source for our knowledge of the agencies of intellectual life in the Old Dominion. Other historians throughout the eighteenth century included in their narratives fragments of intellectual history.

The first monumental work devoted solely to this field appeared in 1803, when the Reverend Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian clergyman of New York, published his two-volume *Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*. This series of essays on virtually every phase of the intellectual life of Europe in the eighteenth century included surveys of the state of knowledge in the United States and of American contributions to knowledge. With all its shortcomings it was a notable effort and is still useful to the student of the growth of American thought.

The historians of the first half of the nineteenth century were above all else concerned with political and institutional history. In consequence our intellectual past fared badly at their hands. The neglect that it suffered in formal historical writings was in part compensated for by the appearance, beginning in 1829, of a series of anthologies of American literature and by an unbroken interest in the history of American letters. Moreover, in such informal histories as academic orators often provided at the meetings of literary societies or at com-

mencements, our intellectual glory was a favored theme. But the circumstance that Americans had actually created a notable political record, that sectional and party controversies were so absorbing, that our intellectual life was so largely subordinated to other matters, tended to keep that aspect of our past subordinate. The tendency to emphasize political events was subsequently confirmed by the political and institutional interests of scholars trained in the German historical seminars and influenced by such English historians as E. A. Freeman.

The last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed significant departures from this pattern. John Bach McMaster's first volume of the *History of the People of the United States* (1883) devoted refreshing attention to intellectual developments and interests, and this emphasis was sustained in subsequent volumes. Eight years after the appearance of McMaster's first volume Henry Adams, in his *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*, made an effort to fathom the "American mind" of the early nineteenth century. Edward Eggleston called attention to the need for studying the cultural development of the American people. He did not carry out his full plans, but the appearance in 1901 of *The Transit of Civilization from England to America in the Seventeenth Century* broke new ground. About this time Moses Coit Tyler was bringing to a close his scholarly and comprehensive literary history of the colonial and revolutionary periods, the first volume of which had appeared in 1878.

New European emphases in the historical studies of European development were not without their influence. In England, Greene's *Short History of the English People* carried still further the tradition of Macaulay and others in devoting some attention to the social and cultural chapters of the nation's past, and historians of France were following in the same course. The visit to America in 1904 of the German historian, Karl Lamprecht, did much to focus attention on cultural history, broadly conceived. Taking up the work of Dr. John Draper of New York University, who had published in 1863 *The Intellectual Development of Europe*, James Harvey Robinson of Columbia University called the attention of students of American history as well as those in the European field to the history of man's mind as an important means of determining how the past gave way to the present.

Evarts B. Greene, Frederick J. Turner, Edward Channing, and, on the Pacific coast, Herbert E. Bolton, all gave attention to the development of intellectual interests.

In the period since the First World War great strides have been made in the study of our intellectual past and this aspect of our history has begun to come into its own. The publication in 1917 and the following years of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* was significant by reason of its scope and scholarship. When the *History of American Life* under the editorship of Dixon Ryan Fox and Arthur M. Schlesinger began to appear in 1927, it was clear beyond doubt that our intellectual history is both richer than anyone had supposed it to be and, furthermore, susceptible of the same scholarly treatment that other aspects of the national life have received.

Yet in view of the emphasis given by historians to political, military, and economic activities, it is still correct to say that intellectual life in the United States, especially in its relation to other phases of history, has been, comparatively speaking, sadly neglected in detail and in general. Only in 1940 was our first history of American democratic ideas made available; and admirable though Ralph Gabriel's study is, it does not cover the whole sweep of democratic thought in America. We have recently had from the hands of Charles and Mary Beard a history of the idea of civilization in the United States, but we are virtually without histories of such ideas as liberty, progress, security, militarism, individualism, and collectivism—ideas now in tumultuous and heated use. It is impossible at present to say with what meanings they have been employed, or what changes in meaning they have undergone in the course of their American experience.

The situation is only slightly better in the area of systematic thought. It is true that we have histories of American philosophic thought, of educational thought, and of political thought; and that we shall presently have from Joseph Dorfman a systematic history of American economic thought. Religious and theological thought in America have also been studied and reported on for certain periods. But these histories of American systems of thought, despite their merits, are not comprehensive. Furthermore, there are no general histories of scientific and technological thought, or of esthetic thought, or of American social thought.

Even more striking is the dearth of studies of the ideas or fragments of larger bodies of thought present in the minds of the great mass of common people or implicit in their behavior. The vast majority of plain people do not, of course, write books or make public addresses or focus their attention in any sustained way on the objects of intellectual interest. Yet popular thought is certainly a phase of American life that bears profoundly on the nature of American democracy and on American destiny itself. A people commonly believed to be noted for its common sense deserves studies indicating what each generation from the beginning has regarded as practical, as common sense. To what extent have the assumptions of what is regarded as common sense been implicit in the behavior of ordinary men and women, and to what extent have they been made explicit by their spokesmen or by writers, orators, and artists?

We have at our command few adequate histories of specific disciplines in the United States—progress of knowledge in the natural sciences, for example, or in geography, history, or psychology. The studies that do exist are for the most part lacking in comprehensiveness.

Nor have all the histories of knowledge, of thought, and of speculation related the subject matter to changing social, economic, and cultural conditions. In a few cases, it is true, efforts to do so have been made. In this field Vernon L. Parrington was a pioneer. *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927, 1930) related the writings of American men of letters, political leaders, orators, and other figures to the social and economic conflicts in American life, especially to agrarianism on the one hand and to capitalism on the other. Bernard Smith's *Forces in American Criticism* (1939) carried this approach further. In the chapters in *The Rise of American Civilization* and *America in Midpassage* dealing with American cultural interests, the Beards have achieved notable success in the integration of ideas and interests, of cultural values, systems of thought, and bodies of knowledge with the context of which all these are part.

Some may contend that the history of intellectual life in America cannot be written now for the reason that adequate special studies on which a general synthesis must rest have not yet been made. According to one widely held view, efforts to grasp the whole or any part,

even in thought, are useless until preliminary inquiries have been completed. In fact, however, monographic studies made without thought about the relations of the special to the general are likely to be arid.

Actually it is not possible, of course, for specialized research and writing to proceed without some reference to thought, however stray and surreptitious such thought may be, about the wider relationships. Since particulars do bear relations to the general, preliminary thought about the problem of these relations, based of course on the knowledge available, can aid in the production of monographs that will be useful as the higher and higher generalizations are reached. To wait until scholars have completed all the requisite special studies is to postpone wider consideration on the assumption that these studies will in fact be completed; such an assumption may or may not be warranted. So to wait is to deprive even particular inquiries of the thought about the problem of the whole, which is available at the present stage in the development of the theme.

The task of writing a social history of American thought may be undertaken, meantime, in the light of present thought and knowledge. It is a task of such magnitude that the author has no idea that his labors are definitive. He hopes only that they may furnish some suggestions to other historians who will explore this field, and that they may help some readers to achieve a fuller appreciation of our country's past.

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M. C.

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PART I

The American Adaptation of the
European Heritage

CHAPTER I

A Variety of Peoples Bequeath Legacies to the New Nation

What then is the American, this new man? He is either an European, or the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country.

—DE CRÉVECEUR, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 1782

By the end of the eighteenth century the young American nation possessed a distinctive intellectual life. The ideas and agencies of thought and opinion in the newly launched republic were no mere replica of those in the Old World. This resulted in the first instance from the fact that the American physical environment provided a unique stage on which colonial life developed. The unique nature of intellectual life in the young nation was also related to the fact that a company of many-tongued actors played their parts on that stage.

The colonial legacy to the United States was the contribution of many peoples each influencing the others—a process that inevitably modified the ideas and cultural institutions imported from the Old World by each of these varied groups. The influence of non-English-speaking peoples of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on subsequent intellectual life in America has often been underestimated. At the same time the ideas and agencies of intellectual life bequeathed by the colonial era owed far more to Great Britain than to any other land, for English-speaking peoples made up the dominant element in colonial society.

The Unique Legacy of the English-speaking Colonial Americans

The English-speaking colonists contributed, from their own heritage, all-important vehicles for the communication of knowledge, ideas,