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EUROPE'S CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

EDWARD L. BERNAYS FOUNDATION LECTURES

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The question posed by the title of this lecture is, I find, a difficult one for several reasons. In the first place, Christian morality quite properly tells us that in matters of "giving" the left hand need not know what the right hand is doing. Secondly, and in accordance with the same morality, it is not he who gives but he who receives that is expected to list by name and number the things contributed. In fact, therefore, I should be here to listen and you to speak.

But you have chosen to reverse these roles and invited me here to describe my country's share in Europe's overall contribution to American civilization.

While I shall attempt to do so with great pleasure, I find this task by no means easy. For in the two centuries that have nearly passed since the foundation of this country, American

civilization has become a whole exceeding in quantity and differing in quality from the sum of its component parts; thus to try to single out the specific contributions of one country is to extricate what has ceased to be extricable, since the process of organic growth and fusion that has since taken place is by nature irreversible.

It is best, therefore, to begin by letting the facts of history speak for themselves.

Dutch-American history, if I may use that phrase, begins with Henry Hudson's arrival on these shores in 1609. Holland was then at the threshold of her Golden Age. Her proud ships were already sailing the seas to every corner of the globe, and her achievements in commerce and trade and in the arts were to bring her lasting fame.

But no country can be so much in the world's forefront and not have rivals. Since 1568, Holland had been at war with Spain, and in 1609 the two nations, both seeking relief from the strain of battle but unable as yet to conclude peace, signed an armistice treaty for twelve years.

In this much-needed interval, Holland could concentrate on her world trade, which flourished especially in such distant parts as Java and the Moluccas; on her freight shipping in Europe, and, finally, on the region that Henry Hudson had just explored. Settlers crossed the Ocean, and in a relatively short time New Netherland was born, a new possession of the Dutch Republic.

Time was short, however. In 1621, the war with Spain began anew. It was at this time that the Dutch founded the West India Company, not so much for the purpose of colonization but in order to attack the enemy in his American possessions and to capture the famed treasure fleets that crossed over from Mexico. Since the West India Company concentrated its activities in the Western hemisphere the States General of the Dutch Republic put it in charge also of the possession near the Hudson river. However, the Company's Directors, highly adept at trading and pirating but unskilled in the art of government, had little interest in New Netherland, which in their eyes offered nothing more than some beaver skins and small quantities of fur. Seeking to minimize their obligation they began selling land to Amsterdam investors such as Samuel

Godijn, Kiliaen van Rensselaer, Samuel Blommaert and others; these men were the later patroons of New Netherland.

A colony of Dutch burghers thus grew alongside the Hudson, whose members had not come here with the intention of returning home as rich men after a few years. In this temperate climate they felt they could settle permanently. Their Governors, however, were appointed by the Amsterdam Directors of the West India Company and in fact served the latter's interests to the exclusion of all else.

To understand the growing conflict between the settlers and their rulers we must remember that their relationship differed sharply from that existing in Holland between the citizenry and the government.

Judged by 17th century standards the Dutch Republic was, in fact, so democratically governed that no European was even for a moment willing to entertain the belief that it could last. The monarchs of that age looked down with contempt on this Republic of burghers, and later, when the Republic became a power to

reckon with, their contempt turned to hatred.

Unlike the later American version, the Dutch Republic was not founded on a particular philosophy; it had simply evolved out of the country's history and circumstances. But once it did exist and proved enduring, the love for (and the philosophy of) what was called "true freedom" began to take an ever stronger hold on its citizens.

They had no popular government in our sense of the term, yet the government that elected itself from the established middle class did not become a caste.

The people knew the members of their city governments and of the States General personally and thoroughly: that man's father was the well-known skipper, the other fellow's a hide merchant known to all. Often their family names indicated their trade: Hooft (literally, head, i. e. skipper who heads the ship's crew); Huydecoper (hide merchant); Bicker (chiseler) and Corver (basket weaver). These members of the merchant middle class filled the benches of the States General.

The relationship between the citizenry and the members of the States General (though officially titled "the High and Mighty Lords") was thus nothing like that between a lord and his servants. In fact the citizenry as a whole belonged to one broadly conceived middle class which included also the majority of laborers and seafaring folk. The Dutch Republic had no impoverished, urban proletariat nor a destitute class of peasants such as existed in other European states.

This situation, then, was what the settlers of New Netherland were accustomed to. And, even though they had no intention of returning home, they still considered themselves citizens of the Dutch Republic and thus entitled to democratic government.

Insistence on democratic rights, on government with the consent of, and undiminishing responsibility to, the governed, is recognized today as a peculiarly American characteristic that has evolved naturally out of this nation's history. But in the context of Europe's contribution to American civilization it may perhaps be viewed as one of the oldest and most decisive effects

my country has had on yours.

For the conflict in New Netherland grew as Governors came and went, and reached a climax of sorts under Peter Stuyvesant, who began his administration by abolishing the advisory council of citizens in his government and simply exiled those "rebels" who wrote home to complain.

Then, in 1649, a delegation representing the dissatisfied New Netherlanders was sent to Holland with a petition entitled Remonstrance of New Netherland to be handed to the States General. Under its able leader, Adriaan van der Donck, who was also the author of the Remonstrance, the delegation succeeded in having the colony placed directly under States General supervision.

The events of the time, however, did not favor a genuine and lasting improvement. Soon after the delegation's visit Holland was engaged in the first of three naval wars with England, and Stuyvesant was forgotten for the moment.

A final complaint by America's first poet, Jacob Steendam, entitled Klagt van Nieuw Amsterdam tot Hare Moeder (Remonstrance of New Amsterdam to Its Mother) went unheeded.

Possible further developments were cut off by the Peace of Breda, following Admiral Michiel de Ruyter's victory over the English at sea. New Netherland was given over to the English, in exchange for Surinam, their possession in the West Indies. New Amsterdam was no more; New York was yet to be.

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I have referred earlier to the difficulty of pointing up specific, individual aspects of what is, after all, a complex historical phenomenon, namely the foundation of one country's civilization upon a variety of older cultures. One may ask, in the embarrassing fashion of children and poets, why we engage in such painstaking labor at all. Why run the risk of distorting the past, or misapprehending it, by seeking to unravel its many threads?

The answer, like the question, is fundamental - and twofold. Firstly, as Santayana has said, "He who forgets the past is condemned to relive it." Secondly, and more importantly perhaps, as humans we cannot live with the apparent randomness of historical events, past or present. Randomness is lack of meaning; the study of history is the search for meaning applied to the past, with the added object of illuminating the present.

The point I have just made is not by way of digression from our topic. There is a subtle but powerful temptation, in considering the origins of American civilization (or indeed those of any major event in history), to extract from the facts known to us such meaning as will best suit our purpose, and to pay little heed to the fact that our purpose tends to change with ourselves.

In the pre-Revolutionary period just described, for example, we have emphasized the democratic traditions that the first Dutch settlers brought along. These are viewed as the beginnings of American democracy, at least in the area of Dutch settlement. The question of our contribution has thus received

at least a partial answer: the tree of 17th century Dutch democracy sprouted new seeds in American soil.

But what of the second wave of settlers from Holland, who arrived in the 1840's and spread all over what was then the territory of the United States? Why did they come, what did they do, and what qualities of mind and heart did they bestow on this newly emerging nation? Once again, let us look at the facts.

The first difference between this group and those who came before the American Revolution is, of course, that the later arrivals were immigrants, not settlers. Thus their motive in leaving home and their expectations of America were likewise different.

Holland, as you know, has traditionally been an agricultural country. It was only in this century that industry took the lead over agriculture; in the period we are considering this all-important change was not even envisaged, and there were, in fact, more farmers and fruit growers than there was

arable land available.

Thus most of the mid-19th century immigrants from Holland were farmers in need of land.

They settled in Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin, where they helped open up and develop the Middle West. Later arrivals, who found property less easy to come by in these regions, moved on to other, more distant parts of the country.

This explains why one finds traces of Dutch agriculture all over the United States, including Colorado, South Carolina and Texas, but especially in those regions whose climate and soil conditions most closely resembled those of Holland.

Nevertheless, Michigan and Wisconsin continued to attract the largest number of settlers, and this not simply because these states held a special appeal for land-hungry farmers.

For, in addition to being an agricultural country,

Holland has a further characteristic of equal importance which now needs mentioning. I refer to the impact of the Reformation, whose effects were perhaps more keenly felt and may well have proved more enduring in Holland than in other countries of Europe.

Furthermore, no sooner had the new spirit of reform taken hold than it had to be defended in a war which, inconceivably enough to modern minds, lasted 80 years, from 1568 until 1648.

At its end, the Dutch nation had undergone a change of character so profound that to this day historians are turning out impressive volumes on the subject. For centuries to come, religion was to play a dominant role in Holland's national life.

Around 1850, Dutch Protestants were distinguished as orthodox Calvinists and followers of the large Dutch-Reformed Church; Catholics, while undivided, constituted a minority that was vastly unpopular.

The government was entrusted to Protestants and its

members had some say in matters involving religion and public worship. This left the orthodox Calvinists and the Catholics with less freedom than they thought their due.

And so it was that these men, united by circumstance but deeply divided in spirit, resolved to begin a new life of freedom across the Atlantic.

In keeping with their all-pervading religious differences, they parted company soon after their arrival here, the Catholics settling in Wisconsin, the Protestants in Michigan.

There can be no doubt that their venture proved successful, both for them and for the area they set out to make their own. They found in America the full measure of freedom they sought; in exchange, they gave their considerable skills (Dutch agriculture had excelled in Europe for many centuries) and the determination and strength common to those who are prepared to pay dearly for their ideals of freedom and religion.

We must not imagine, though, that at the time of their

arrival Americans stood ready to receive them with open arms and smiles of welcome. An Iowa journalist, voicing the opinion of the "Know-Nothings" in 1855, wrote:

These strangers from Holland do not unite with us in the building of America - let us do justice in our own right by cutting off as soon as possible all immigration to our country. America is only for the Americans.

But the newcomers were undaunted. Proudly and securely they replied:

He and he alone is an American in the true sense of the word in whose heart are engraved the great truths of that glorious document (the Declaration of Independence), who is ready to endure everything rather than to give up the great treasure of liberty and independence secured for us by a former generation of self-denying patriots.

And so they stayed. The fertile soil was put to maximum use by skillful hands; schools and colleges were founded; communities came into being and grew in freedom and prosperity.

* * *

Let us now return to the question that is implicit in the title of this lecture. We provided a partial answer in describing the democratic traditions and ideals brought here by the settlers of pre-revolutionary times. The tree of 17th-century Dutch democracy, we said, sprouted new seeds in American soil.

It is less easy to state the case in such general, or even in metaphoric terms with reference to the settlers of the 19th century. The sequence of events allows us no other picture of them than that of individuals seeking a livelihood in freedom. Their expectations, their hopes, their ideals were personal; what their predecessors 200 years before are said collectively to have brought here from Holland is what these men, individually, were bent on finding outside of it: freedom.

We are thus faced with that aspect of our theme (and of history in general) that is most commonly overlooked by layman and historian alike: the role of individual men and individual goals.

We prefer broad interpretations, in terms of major

themes rather than cumulative, unrelated happenings not only because they counteract our discomfort with randomness and lack of inherent meaning. Broad views appeal by their simplicity and uniformity, thus obscuring that multitude of chance events and details devoid of intrinsic importance that threatens to overwhelm us while failing to stir the imagination; they make of history a huge edifice of which we see only the lofty pillars, the imposing structure, not the individual bricks without which it could not have been built.

Is there, then, no edifice? Can we not discern, in our common past, a conscious transplanting of ideas, of people, of an ancient heritage?

The truth, as always, is awkwardly situated in the grey that is neither black nor white but has something of each. The edifice is there, but it was made of single bricks; our contribution to American civilization is a reality, but it was brought about by individual men pursuing individual goals.

The pioneers who helped open up new territory; the

men who defended their rights as citizens against an arbitrary government; the bankers who gave John Adams the loans his country needed so desperately to fight its war of independence; the great number of Dutch scientists, artists and professional men who to this day continue to enrich the life of this nation; the combined efforts of all of them represent our contribution, but all of them had to be individuals par excellence to make it.

* * *

There is a third period to be considered, which separates the two we have already reviewed. It is that of the birth of this Republic, when Holland was deeply divided and troubled politically but economically still the richest country in the world.

The division was a lopsided one. The intellectual and business worlds constituted a majority known for its democratic beliefs and keen eye for trade expansion possibilities; they were united in the Patriots party. Opposing them and in power was a small group that owed much of its strength to an outrageous

policy of nepotism and the support of the ultra-conservative Prince of Orange.

While authors and orators lavished praise on the American Revolution and urged that the old Republic come to the aid of the new, the conservative government shunned all contact with the rebels. Nevertheless, Dutch ships were sailing from Amsterdam to the island of St. Eustatius in the Antilles, carrying arms for the Americans.

On the part of the Patriots this undercover aid to the Americans served several purposes.

It was an outlet for their dissatisfaction with the conservative government in power; it was a step on the way to American independence and thus to the opening up of a new market coveted by the businessmen Patriots; and it was an act of retaliation against England.

Since 1776 the English had been halting Dutch ships at sea to search them for "illegal cargo." In vain, the Patriots

had been urging the government to protest this action.

The importance of the Patriots' aid to the rebels is apparent from this comment by England's Admiral Rodney, who succeeded in capturing St. Eustatius island:

Had it not been for this infamous island the American rebellion could not possibly have succeeded.

Shortly afterward, profoundly angered by the Patriots' support to the rebels, England broke her alliance of 100 years with the Dutch Republic.

When John Adams subsequently reached Holland as a Congressional delegate in quest of financial aid, he quite naturally turned to the Patriots who owned the lion's share of Holland's capital and who, moreover, would be interested in helping establish a new market overseas since their trade with England's colonies had been cut down by the Act of Navigation.

Steering clear of the Prince of Orange ("as incurable as George III, his cousin") and his conservative friends in the

government, Adams, using his considerable diplomatic talent, set out to cultivate the Patriots - and succeeded remarkably well.

Before he left Holland in the fall of 1782 he had obtained two sizable loans, the first amounting to no less than five million guilders.

When he returned in 1783, despite opposition from conservative quarters he was officially recognized as America's Ambassador to the Republic.

Probably few ambassadorships have been as successful as that of Adams in Holland. His popularity rose by the day; he moved about the country as the guest of city governments and business firms; he pleaded eloquently and with humor ("I know not why we should blush to confess that molasses were an essential ingredient in American independence") for aid to his country's economy which faltered for lack of firm federal power.

He appealed to the business insight (and foresight) of Dutch investors as well as to the idealism of Dutch intellectuals, and he succeeded at a very early stage in bringing about a treaty of commerce and friendly alliance between the two nations.

America's situation improved with the drafting of the Constitution and Hamilton's taking over of the Treasury. Order was emerging out of chaos, and soon Jefferson wrote proudly to John Jay: "Our credit is now first at the Amsterdam Exchange."

For Holland, America never became the market it had hoped for. England knew the country, its needs, its tastes and its potential more thoroughly and she was favored. But our friendship and our alliance were to endure.

* * *

Such is our story. We are now almost two centuries removed from those beginnings, and we are still joined in our

commitment to preserve at all costs those values for which this country fought its way to independence.

Contemporary history, particularly that of the United States, has brought home to all of us with numbing force the realization that man shapes his world both as a collective and as an individual being.

Each one of us is driven as much by individual desires and ideas as by collective ones, and in the last analysis our collective well-being remains wholly dependent on that of each individual.

Our contribution to American civilization encompasses the lives, the hopes, the undertakings of many individuals, their successes, their failures and their ultimate triumph. We owe it to them and to ourselves, their descendants, to treasure the past that joined us and to build a future that will keep us so.
