NOTES ON THE GREATNESS AND DECADE OF EUROPE

In modern times not a single power or empire in Europe has been able to stand supreme, to dominate others far and near, or even to retain its conquests for longer than fifty years. The greatest men have failed to achieve this object, and even the most fortunate led their countries to ruin. Charles V, Louis XIV, Napoleon, Metternich, Bismarck: average span—forty years. There are no exceptions.

Europe had all that was required to conquer and rule the rest of the world, and to organize it for European ends. She had invincible means and the men who had created them. But the rulers of Europe were of far lesser stature than her inventors. They were bred on the past, and could do nothing but repeat the past. And now even the opportunity has vanished. Her history and political traditions, her petty quarrels, parochial and commercial, her jealousies and local spites, and, in a word, the lack of vision, the small-mindedness inherited from the time when she was as ignorant as and no more powerful than other parts of the world, made Europe waste that tremendous opportunity which she did not even realize in good time. Napoleon seems to have been the only one to have sensed what could happen and what might be attempted. He thought on the scale of the modern world, but was not understood and said so. But he came too soon; the time was not ripe, and the means at his disposal were far inferior to ours. After him, everyone began once more to eye his neighbour's acres and think in terms of the immediate present.

The miserable Europeans preferred playing at Armagnacs and Burgundians to assuming throughout the globe the great part which the Romans had been able to assume and maintain for centuries in the world of their time. Their numbers and means were insignificant by comparison with ours, but they found more just and consistent ideas in a fowl's entrails than all our political sciences can muster between them.

Europe will be punished for her policy. She will be deprived of wine, beer, and liquors. And other things ... 

Europe obviously aspires to be governed by an American committee. Her entire policy is aimed toward that end.

Not knowing how to shake off our history, we shall be delivered from it by happy peoples who have none
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or next to none. It is the happy peoples who will impose their good fortune upon us.

Europe was clearly distinct from any other part of the world. Not through her politics, but in spite of it—or, rather, in contradiction to it, she had developed her freedom of mind to the utmost, combined her passion for understanding with her insistence upon exactitude, invented a precise and active curiosity, and by an obstinate pursuit of results which can be accurately compared and totalled, she created for herself a capital of most powerful laws and processes. Yet her politics remained stagnant, and only took from the unique wealth and resources I have just mentioned, what was barely necessary to bolster up this primitive policy and furnish it with more fearful and barbarous weapons.

There thus appeared a contrast, a difference, an astonishing disharmony between the states of the same mind, according to whether it gave itself up to its disinterested task, its rigorous and critical conscience, its wittingly explored depths, or whether it applied itself to political affairs. For its politics it seemed to reserve its most careless, negligible, and vile productions—instincts, shibboleths, memories, regrets, lusts, meaningless sounds and dizzying meanings—everything that was rejected by the arts and sciences, everything they could no longer tolerate.

All politics, though usually without realizing its implications, implies a certain conception of man, and even an idea of the destiny of the species, an entire metaphysic ranging from the crudest sensualism to the most audacious mysticism.

Suppose you were given unlimited power. You are an honest man, with the firm intention of doing your best. You have your head screwed on the right way, your mind knows how to contemplate and correlate things clearly; and, finally, you are self-detached and placed in such an eminent and powerfully interesting position that your own personal advantage seems futile and insignificant by comparison with your task and the possibilities before you. You are not even disturbed by what would disturb anyone else—that is by the thought of the general suspense—and you are not intimidated or overwhelmed by the hopes laid upon you...

Well, what are you going to do? What are you going to do today?

There are victories per se and victories per accidens.

Peace is a virtual, mute, sustained victory of potential powers against probable greeds.

There could be real peace only if everyone were satisfied. That means there is not often a real peace. There are only actual states of peace which, like wars, are mere expediends.

The only treaties that ought to count are those which would effect a settlement between ulterior motives.
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Whatever can be freely agreed upon is as good as stripped of all future.

People flatter themselves that they can impose their will on their opponents. Sometimes they succeed. But such a will may be disastrous. Nothing seems to me more difficult than to determine what are the real interests of a nation, which are not to be confused with its aspirations. The satisfaction of our desires does not always divert us from our road to ruin.

A war whose result is decided only by the inequality of the combatants’ total powers is a war in suspense.

A few men’s actions have, for millions of other men, consequences similar to those arising for all living creatures from disturbances and variations in their environment. Just as natural causes produce hail, typhoons, epidemics, so do intellectual causes act upon millions of men, of whom the large majority suffer them as they suffer the caprices of the sky, the sea, and the earth’s crust. Intellect and will affecting the masses in the same way as physical, blind phenomena—that is what we mean by politics.

OF NATIONS

It is never easy to form a clear picture of what is called a “nation.” The simplest and most salient features escape a country’s own people, who grow insensitive to what they have always been used to seeing. The foreigner who sees them sees them too sharply and

does not sense that mass of intimate relationships and invisible exchanges by which the mystery of the profound union of millions of human beings is accomplished.

There are thus two major ways of being wrong about any given nation.

Moreover, the very idea of a nation in general cannot easily be grasped. The mind is bewildered by very diverse aspects of the idea, and hesitates between very different modes of definition. As soon as it thinks a satisfactory formula has been found, this in turn suggests some particular case which the mind had forgotten to include.

The idea is as familiar to us in daily usage, and as present in our feelings, as it is complex and indeterminate upon reflection. But the same applies to all words of major importance. We speak glibly of rights, race, property, but what are rights, race, and property? We know and we do not know.

Thus all these powerful ideas, as abstract as they are vital, which live so intensely and imperatively within us, all those terms which compose in the minds of people and statesmen the very thoughts, projects, arguments, and decisions on which hang the destinies, prosperity, or ruin, the life or death of human beings, are, upon reflection, only vague and impure symbols. . . . Yet when men use these indefinable terms among themselves, they understand each other very well. These notions are, then, clear and adequate between man and man, but obscure and almost infinitely conflicting in each man taken by himself.
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The nations are as foreign to each other as people of
different characters, ages, beliefs, customs and needs.
They watch each other anxiously and curiously; smile,
sulk, admire and imitate some detail but despise the
whole; are gnawed with envy or inflated with disdain.
However sincere sometimes their desire to understand
and draw together, their relations always become
clouded and are broken off at a certain stage. There are
certain limits of intercourse, both in depth and dura-
tion, beyond which they cannot go.

More than one nation is profoundly convinced that
it is intrinsically and exclusively superior to all others,
the elect of an infinite future, the only one that can
aspire, whatever its present state of misery or weak-
ness may be, to the supreme development of the poten-
tialities it thinks it has. Each one finds arguments in
the past or in the possible, and none likes to consider
its misfortunes as legitimate children.

The nations necessarily find motives for preferring
themselves to any other, according as their comparisons
are based on territory, population, material progress,
customs, liberties, public order, or culture and intel-
lectual works, or even memories and hopes. In the
perpetual game they play, every one of them holds its
cards. But some of the cards are real and others are
imaginary. Some nations have in their hands nothing
but mediaeval or classical trumps, dead and venerable
values; others count their fine arts, their landscape,
their national music, their graces or their noble history,
which they throw on the table among real spades and
real clubs.

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All nations have present, past, or future reasons for
thinking themselves incomparable. And they are in-
comparable. The impossibility of comparing these
great entities, which only touch and affect each other
through their characters and external means, is not the
smallest difficulty of speculative politics. But the essen-
tial facts in the making of each one of them, its life-
principle, the intense internal bond which links to-
gether all the individuals of a people, as well as its
successive generations, differs in nature from one na-
tion to another. In one it is the race, in another the
language, in others territory, memories, or interests,
which account in so many ways for the national unity
of an organized human agglomeration. The underly-
ing cause of such a solidarity can be of an entirely
different nature from nation to nation.

Growing nations should remember that, in nature,
no tree, though placed in the best conditions of light,
soil, and plot, can continue to grow and spread in-
definitely.

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ON THE SUBJECT OF DICTATORSHIP

régime considerably tormented as much by facts as by the reflections and comparisons which changes in neighbouring countries excited in peoples’ minds. It is remarkable that dictatorship should be as contagious today as liberty once used to be.

Since the modern world has not so far learned how to adjust its soul, its memory, and social habits or conventions of politics and law, to the new body and organs which it has recently formed, it is embarrassed by the contrasts and contradictions which are constantly arising between the concepts and ideals of historical origin which compose its intellectual heritage and its emotional capacity, and the needs, the connections, the conditions and rapid variations of a positive and technical origin, which from every direction take it by surprise and baffle its ancient experience.

The modern world is looking for an economy, a politics, a morality, an aesthetic, and even a religion—and even, perhaps . . . a logic? It is not surprising that of all these experimental developments which are just beginning and whose success or end cannot clearly be foreseen, the idea of dictatorship, that notorious vision of the “intelligent tyrant,” should be proposed and even imposed here or there.

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AMERICA AS A PROJECTION OF THE EUROPEAN MIND

IF THE MODERN world is to avoid the universal and irreplaceable ruin of all the values created by centuries of tentative efforts and experiments of every kind, and if—after I know not what trials and vicissitudes—it is to attain a certain political, cultural, and economic stability, we must regard it as probable that the various regions of the globe, instead of opposing each other through differences of every kind, will complete each other by means of these differences. They can become even more themselves, the more they participate freely and rationally in the common tasks of life. For instance, we shall no longer see nations creating and maintaining entirely artificial industries which can survive only by subsidies and tariffs. Besides, the very division of habitable land into politically defined nations is purely empirical. It can be explained historically but not organically, for the line drawn on a map or on land to represent a frontier results from a
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A series of accidents which have been consecrated by treaties. In many cases such frontiers are oddly drawn: they divide countries which resemble each other, they join others which are vastly different, and they introduce difficulties and complications into human affairs which lead to wars that never provide a solution, but on the contrary sow further strife.

A curious point about this historical and traditional definition of nations is that the present conception of the grouping of men into nations is completely anthropomorphic. A nation is characterized by its sovereign rights and property. It owns, buys, sells, fights, tries to live and thrive at others' expense; it is jealous, proud, rich, or poor; it criticizes others; it has friends, enemies, and sympathies; it is either artistic or inartistic, and so on. In a word, nations are persons, to whom we attribute sentiments, rights and duties, virtues and vices, wills and responsibilities, according to an immemorial habit of simplification.

There is no need for me to enlarge on the results of this identification of human groups with individual beings.

But the modern transformation of the earth continues, and the new system of life which ought to correspond to that enormous change runs foul of the political structure I have just outlined. Let us recall in a few words the main characteristics of that change as I pictured them elsewhere:

First of all the entire globe is occupied: there is no free land left. Secondly, there is a growing technical equalization of peoples, with a consequent decline in

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the causes of pre-eminence of the European type of nation. Then there is an increasing need for physical energy and, consequently, for such materials as oil and coal from which it is produced. Finally, there is a rapid and fantastic increase in methods of communication and transmission.

All this is increasingly stressed, confirmed, and becomes more fully operative from day to day. It is combined with the ponderous heritage of the ancient world, with its ancient and primitive politics. The chances of a conflict are thereby frightfully multiplied. The instability of the world equilibrium is extreme. No one can any longer flatter himself that he can foresee. The greatest statesmen and the most profound minds can calculate nothing. An unforeseen invention can change overnight all the conditions of economic or military power.

Thus, on one hand there are primitive and anthropomorphic conceptions; national personalities which are the sovereigns and owners of arbitrarily divided territories. On the other hand there is a growing interdependence of regions, needs for exchanges and balances, an inevitable technical or economic dependence of one country upon another. In a modern war, the man who kills another man is exterminating a producer of what he himself consumes, or a consumer of his own produce.

It would be useless to describe the fatal effects of this state of things. Unfortunate Europe is a prey to a crisis of stupidity, credulity, and bestiality which is all too obvious. It is not impossible that our old and opulent
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culture will abase itself to the lowest point in a few years. I wrote twenty years ago, "We civilizations now know that we are mortal..." Everything that has happened since then has only increased the mortal danger which I then pointed out.

I now come to America. Whenever my thoughts become too gloomy and whenever I despair of Europe, I can restore some degree of hope only by thinking of the New World. Into the two Americas, Europe has sent its messages, the communicable creations of its mind, all the most positive things it has discovered, and, in short, all that was least liable to deterioration through transportation and remoteness from prevailing conditions. It was truly a form of "natural selection" that took place and which extracted from the European mind its products of universal value, while all its more conventional and too historical elements remained in the Old World.

I am not saying that all the best has crossed the Atlantic or that all the inferior has remained behind. This would not have been a natural selection. I mean it was those things which were most capable of living under skies very distant from those under which they were born, that have crossed the Atlantic, and have taken root in a soil which to a great extent was virginal.

To end with, let us consider two ideas which might be derived from the rather too summary observations which precede.

Firstly, the American continent bore races of its own and signs of anterior life of various kinds. It is not impossible that important reactions might be produced some day as a result of the contact and penetration of European factors. For instance, I should not be surprised if most happy variations resulted from the action of our aesthetic ideas filtering into the powerful character of native Mexican art. Grafting is a most fertile procedure in the development of the arts. Let us admit that all classical art is a product of such grafting.

The second idea is of an entirely different order. If Europe must see its culture perish or decline; if our towns, museums, monuments, and universities must be destroyed in the fury of a scientifically conducted war; if the existence of thinking and creative men is rendered impossible or hideous by brutal political or economic circumstances, a certain consolation, a certain hope remains in the idea that our works, the memory of our labours, the names of our greatest men will not become as though they had never been, and that there will be, here and there, in the New World, minds in which will endure, with a second life, some of the marvellous creations of the unfortunate Europeans.

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