

Walter Bagehot, On the Use of Conflict, 1872

Walter Bagehot (1826–1877) was a British social scientist and early editor of the Economist. He used burgeoning social science techniques to prove the inherent backwardness of indigenous peoples everywhere. His was a common view during the Victorian era, when racial minorities were stereotyped with labels of alcoholism and lasciviousness, labels that were perceived as static and unchanging for particular racial or ethnic groups. Bagehot believed in the primacy of the Anglo-Saxon race and in their responsibility to improve the world through imperialism.

Source: Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1873), pp. 41–52, 64, 75–80.

“The difference between progression and stationary inaction,” says one of our greatest living writers, “is one of the great secrets which science has yet to penetrate.” I am sure I do not pretend that I can completely penetrate it; but it undoubtedly seems to me that the problem is on the verge of solution, and that scientific successes in kindred fields by analogy suggest some principles which wholly remove many of its difficulties, and indicate the sort of way in which those which remain may hereafter be removed too.

But what is the problem? Common English, I might perhaps say common civilized thought, ignores it. Our habitual instructors, our ordinary conversation, our inevitable and ineradicable prejudices tend to make us think that “Progress” is the normal fact in human society, the fact which we should expect to see, the fact which we should be surprised if we did not see. But history refutes this. The ancients had no conception of progress; they did not so much as reject the idea; they did not even entertain the idea. Oriental nations are just the same now. Since history began they have always been what

they are. Savages again, do not improve; they hardly seem to have the basis on which to build, much less the material to put up anything worth having. Only a few nations, and those of European origin, advance; and yet these think—seem irresistibly compelled to think—such advance to be inevitable, natural, and eternal. Why then is this great contrast?

In solving, or trying to solve, the question, we must take notice of this remarkable difference, and explain it too, or else we may be sure our principles are utterly incomplete, and perhaps altogether unsound. But what then is that solution, or what are the principles which tend toward it? Three laws, or approximate laws, may, I think, be laid down, with only one of which I can deal in this paper, but all three of which it will be best to state, that it may be seen what I am aiming at.

First. In every particular state of the world, those nations which are strongest tend to prevail over the others; and in certain marked peculiarities the strongest tend to be the best.

Secondly. Within every particular nation the type or types of character then and there most attractive tend to prevail; and the most attractive, though with exceptions, is what we call the best character.

Thirdly. Neither of these competitions is in most historic conditions intensified by extrinsic forces, but in some conditions, such as those now prevailing in the most influential part of the world, both are so intensified.

These are the sort of doctrines with which, under the name of “natural selection” in physical science, we have become familiar; and as every great scientific conception tends to advance its boundaries and to be of use in solving problems not thought of when

it was started, so here, what was put forward for mere animal history may, with a change of form but an identical essence, be applied to human history.

The discussion of these three principles cannot be kept quite apart except by pedantry; but it is almost exclusively with the first—that of the competition between nation and nation, or tribe and tribe (for I must use these words in their largest sense, and so as to include every cohering aggregation of human beings)—that I can deal now; and even as to that I can but set down a few principal considerations.

The profession of the military art is the most conspicuous, I was about to say the most showy, fact in human history. Ancient civilization may be compared with modern in many respects, and plausible arguments constructed to show that it is better; but you cannot compare the two in military power. Napoleon could indisputably have conquered Alexander; our Indian army would not think much of the Retreat of the Ten Thousand. . . . Taken as a whole and allowing for possible exceptions, the aggregate fighting power of mankind has grown immensely, and has been growing continuously since we knew anything about it. . . .

The cause of this military growth is very plain. The strongest nation has always been conquering the weaker; sometimes even subduing it, but always prevailing over it. Every intellectual gain, so to speak, that a nation possessed was in the earliest times made use of—was invested and taken out—in war; all else perished. Each nation tried constantly to be the stronger, and so made or copied the best weapons; by conscious and unconscious imitation each nation formed a type of character suitable to war and conquest. Conquest improved mankind by the intermixture of strengths; the armed truce, which was then called peace, improved them by the competition of training and the

consequent creation of new power. Since the long-headed men first drove the short-headed men out of the best land in Europe, all European history has been the history of the superposition of the more military races over the less military—of the efforts, sometimes successful, sometimes unsuccessful, of each race to get more military; and so the art of war has constantly improved....

Man, being the strongest of all animals, differs from the rest; he was obliged to be his own domesticator; he had to tame himself. And the way in which it happened was that the most obedient, the tamest tribes are, at the first stage in the real struggle for life, the strongest and the conquerors. All are very wild then; the animal vigor, the savage virtue of the race has died out in none, and all have enough of it. But what makes one tribe—one incipient tribe, one bit of a tribe—to differ from another is their relative faculty of coherence. The slightest symptom of legal development, the least indication of a military bond, is then enough to turn the scale. The compact tribes win, and the compact tribes are the tamest. Civilization begins because the beginning of civilization is a military advantage. ...

The problem is, why do men progress? And the answer suggested seems to be that they progress when they have a certain sufficient amount of variability in their nature. This seems to be the old style of explanation by occult qualities.... But the explanation is not so absurd. It says: “The beginning of civilization is marked by an intense legality; that legality is the very condition of its existence, the bond which ties it together; but that legality—that tendency to impose a settled customary yoke upon all men and all actions—if it goes on, kills out the variability implanted by nature, and makes different men and different ages facsimiles of other men and other ages, as we see them so often.

Progress is only possible in those happy cases where the force of legality has gone far enough to bind the nation together, but not far enough to kill out all varieties and destroy nature's perpetual tendency to change." The point of the solution is not the invention of an imaginary agency, but an assignment of comparative magnitude to two known agencies....

But how far are the strongest nations really the best nations? How far is excellence in war a criterion of other excellence? I cannot answer this now fully, but three or four considerations are very plain. War, as I have said, nourishes the "preliminary" virtues [of valor, veracity, the spirit of obedience, and the habit of discipline], and this is almost as much as to say that there are virtues which it does not nourish. All which may be called "grace" as well as virtue it does not nourish; humanity, charity, a nice sense of the rights of others, it certainly does not foster. The insensibility to human suffering, which is so striking a fact in the world as it stood when history first reveals it, is doubtless due to the warlike origin of the old civilization. Bred in war, and nursed in war, it could not revolt from the things of war, and one of the principal of these is human pain. Since war has ceased to be the moving force in the world, men have become more tender one to another, and shrink from what they used to inflict without caring; and this not so much because men are improved (which may or may not be in various cases), but because they have no longer the daily habit of war—have no longer formed their notions upon war, and therefore are guided by thoughts and feelings which soldiers as such—soldiers educated simply by their trade—are too hard to understand.

Very like this is the contempt for physical weakness and for women which marks early society too. The noncombatant population is sure to fare ill during the ages of

combat. But these defects, too, are cured or lessened; women have now marvelous means of winning their way in the world; and mind without muscle has far greater force than muscle without mind. These are some of the changes in the interior of nations, of which the causes must be scrutinized, and I now mention them only to bring out how many softer growths have now half hidden the old and harsh civilization which war made.

But it is very doubtful whether the spirit of war does not still color our morality far too much. Metaphors from law and metaphors from war make most of our current moral phrases, and a nice examination would easily explain that both rather vitiate what both often illustrate. The military habit makes man think far too much of definite action, and far too little of brooding meditation. Life is not a set campaign, but an irregular work, and the main forces in it are not overt resolutions but latent and half-involuntary promptings. The mistake of military ethics is to exaggerate the conception of discipline, and so to present the moral force of the will in a barer form than it ever ought to take. Military morals can direct the axe to cut down the tree, but it knows nothing of the quiet force by which the forest grows.

What has been said is enough, I hope, to bring out that there are many qualities and many institutions of the most various sort which give nations an advantage in military competition; that most of these and most warlike qualities tend principally to good; that the constant winning of these favored competitors is the particular mode by which the best qualities wanted in elementary civilization are propagated and preserved.

QUESTIONS

1. How does Bagehot use contemporary science to justify his observations?

2. How is military might an important indicator of a nation's worthiness?

3. What are the consequences of this view for conquered and colonized peoples?