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Technological Dynamism

A new variety of mind

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It is in the account of the earliest years of his life that Henry Adams lays out a crucial series of dichotomies, a sort of set of building blocks, that he uses to configure a particular perspective on both society and the individual; these oppose, for instance, the sensual quality of the summer with an attitude of devotion towards study during the winter; the civilized, bounded life of a city, with the untamed beauty of the country; the law that regulates social behavior with the individual's liberty. In each of these dichotomies the opposed concepts are interdependent, thus perceived and presented as powerful tensions that only education can balance and turn productive; education, as seen by Adams, is a kind of tether that allows a man to mount the chaotic forces of nature, like a kite mounting the wind. This dialectic game marks the author's perception of his own growth both as an individual and as a member of the society.

“From cradle to grave this problem of running order through chaos, direction through space, discipline through freedom, unity through multiplicity, has always been, and must always be, the task of education, as it is the moral of religion, philosophy, science, art, politics, and economy.” (p.12)

Looking closely at how the world as a physical entity –what we would today call the environment- has a presence in the early chapters of *Education*, becomes clear how its influence appears as a powerful force, as a shaper of *man*. Some of the ideas argued by Adams in this respect, while narrating his childhood in Quincy and Boston, are

reminiscent of the discussion on geographical –or climate- determinism that underlie Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In fact, one can almost imagine a conversation between Jefferson and Buffon, about the influence of climate in *man* and culture. What would they say? In what sense do Adams’ ideas differ in their perspective from those present in Jefferson’s and Buffon’s trans-Atlantic debate? At first it seems evident that the scope of their assertions differs fundamentally; the United States of America was already a free nation, and its independence from England was no longer contested; therefore Adams can afford to make finer distinctions, and look into the details and specificities of life in New England without having a (somehow) explicit political agenda, and without loading his observations with subtle rebellious undertones. In Adams’ case, the description of the emotional range of a young child as a function of seasonal variation is not a political statement but an inquiry into a sensual interplay between the individual and nature:

“Boys are wild animals, rich in the treasures of sense, but the New England boy has a wider range of emotions than boys of more equable climates. He felt his nature crudely, as it was *meant*.” (p.8, emphasis added)

And a few lines below:

“(…) With such standards, the Bostonian could not help but develop a double nature. Life was a double thing.” (p.9)

Perhaps more important than the dualistic nature of Adams’ assertions, is the fact that every substantial element of his account is thought of as a *force*; this might tie to a prevalently Newtonian worldview, but it is very significant that such a term is introduced in what we would call today a social-cultural studies work. Adams brings the word *force* -and with the word a mindset, a universe of references and associations- to the sphere of social studies in an evident attempt to explore historical questions in a “logical” (rather than “narrative”) key¹.

¹ The distinction is put forward by Williams in the Afterword to *The Network Society: A Cross-cultural Perspective*.

“For a hundred years, between 1793 and 1893, the American people had hesitated, vacillated, swayed forward and back, between two forces, one simply industrial, the other capitalistic, centralizing and mechanical. In 1893, the issue came on the single gold standard, and the majority at last declared itself, once for all, in favor of the capitalistic system with all its necessary machinery.” (p.344)

In any case Adams’ portrayal of the rise of scientific thought as a force that superseded notions of religion and culture, of government and economy, is presented to us as a quest of a man to educate himself in a context that is changing at an increasing speed. These processes are explored through the book with insight and intellectual rigor, but their description is not exempt of a certain anguish about the way these quick mutations were urgently demanding new mechanism for understanding historical change. As pointed by R. Williams in the after word of *The Network Society*, the complex set of processes that we refer to as industrialization operated a shift in historical thought, a new sort of balance, where a history of events was entered and transformed by technological innovation. *Education* is a testimony of this shift, in Adams’ sharp awareness of the profound –and still unnamed- cultural change that was in progress.

“Even the violent reaction after 1848, and the return of all Europe to military practices, never for a moment shook the true faith. No one, except Karl Marx, foresaw the radical change. What announced it? The world was producing sixty or seventy million tons of coal, and might be using nearly a million steam horse-power, just beginning to make itself felt.” (p.33)

Education is full of examples where the author provides evidence of his awareness of a new zeitgeist, or spirit of the times, one that he often contrasts with earlier ages of religious dominance.

“The symbol [the cross] represented the sum of nature – the Energy of modern science- and society believed it to be as real as X-rays; perhaps it was! The emperors used it like gunpowder in politics; the physicians used it like rays in medicine the dying clung to it as the quintessence of force, to protect them from the forces of evil on their road to the next life.” (p.479)

Such references to a “new spirit” that emerged from society’s massive implementation of machinery are the symptoms of an incipient century and of a nascent understanding (and awe) of what would soon be called “modernity”. Throughout the

book the word Technology is never used (it was not yet available as we know it), but its absence is blunt to a reader today. In Chapter 22, in a description of the Columbian fair, Adams sharply outlines this absence in all of its promising and worrisome implications:

“Chicago asked in 1893 for the first time the question whether the American people knew where they were driving. Adams answered, for one, that he did not know, but would try to find out. On reflecting sufficiently deeply, under the shadow of Richard Hunt’s architecture, he decided that the American people probably knew no more than he did; but that they might still be *driving or drifting* unconsciously towards some point in space; and that, possibly, if relations enough could be observed, this point might be fixed.”
(p.343, emphasis added)

The absence of the word only makes the description more powerful to our eyes, a description of an entity in its own right, an inexorable agent of change based on a continued process of discovery of previously invisible *forces* by enlightened minds. “Evidently” Adams says, “a new variety of mind had appeared”.

d.c.