THE ALIENATION OF THE EDUCATED CLASS FROM POLITICS: AN ORATION BEFORE THE PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY AT CAMBRIDGE, JUNE 29, 1876

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649281541

The Alienation of the Educated Class from Politics: An Oration Before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, June 29, 1876 by J. L. Diman

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

www.triestepublishing.com

J. L. DIMAN

THE ALIENATION OF THE EDUCATED CLASS FROM POLITICS: AN ORATION BEFORE THE PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY AT CAMBRIDGE, JUNE 29, 1876

Trieste

THE ALIENATION

OF THE

EDUCATED CLASS FROM POLITICS.

An Oration

BEFORE THE

PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY AT CAMBRIDGE,
JUNE 29, 1876.

BY
Jeremiah Lewis
J. L. DIMAN.

PROVIDENCE:
SIDNEY S. RIDER.
1876.

ORATION.

You ask me to address you at a time which hardly allows the usual license in the selection of a theme. Gathering, as we do, to this annual festival on the eve of the great secular commemoration which rivets all regards to the issues of an unexampled experiment, I should justly forfeit your sympathy were I rash enough to divert your thoughts from those imperious public concerns which mingle so much of pride and fear with their far-reaching problems. Even when meeting as associates of an academical fraternity, we cannot forget that we are constituents of a larger society, — partners in a fellowship more comprehensive than any specific calling or profession, — members incorporate into that spacious and supreme commonwealth, without whose wholesome restraints and benign supervision all bonds would be relaxed, all intellectual progress would falter, and all highest aims which we here cherish fail of accomplishment. Least of all can we be unmindful of such weightier concerns when assembled, for the first time, under the shadow of these walls, — these walls that have been reared in recognition of the sacrifice made by scholars on the common altar, which, long as they stand, will attest the alliance of generous culture and unselfish public spirit,

and whose very stones would cry out should the sons of this illustrious mother ever grow heedless of the lessons here inculcated.

Is the culture which proved itself so equal to the strenuous calls of war less able to cope with the strain of civil life? Is that educated class which you represent coming to be a less efficient force in our national experiment? Are our intellectual and our political activities doomed to pursue two constantly diverging paths, our ideal aims ceasing to qualify and shape our practical endeavors? These are among the questions which force themselves upon us at a time like this. The solicitude which they awaken is shown in the humiliating contrasts so freely drawn between the public men of the present day and those of an earlier period; in the frequent discussion of the sphere of the scholar in politics, and in the approbation so heartily expressed when men of exceptional training have been selected to fill important public stations. If this conviction that the breach between Politics and Culture is widening be well grounded, it is a capital arraignment of American society, — the one result that would stamp our republican experiment with failure. Does our political system exclude from public recognition those superior interests which enlist the most enthusiastic coöperation of generous minds, or does it tend to strip of legitimate influence those best fitted to wrestle with worthy issues? Whichever the cause, the result would be equally disastrous. Should such a deplorable divorce become established, our culture would be cut off from healthful contact with living interests, and our politics be robbed of pure and ennobling inspiration; our scholars would sink to

pedants and our statesmen to politicians. The merit of such a polity as ours cannot be measured by the success with which it meets the common ends of government. However effective it may have proved in promoting material prosperity, or a wholesome dispersion of political power, if it does not at the same time hold in happy adjustment the highest instincts and the positive governing forces of the nation, it cannot claim to be truly representative, nor long elicit that prompt allegiance of reason and conscience on which all genuine representative institutions must ultimately rest. Not extent of territory, nor multiplication of material resources, but a noble and sympathetic public life is the gauge of national greatness. "The excellencie and perfection of a commonweale," to borrow the words of Bodin, "are not to be measured by the largeness of the bounds thereof, but by the bounds of virtue itself." All famous states have been informed with ideal forces. No dazzling spread of material products at Philadelphia may console us, if, throughout that varied show, we are haunted with the conviction that what gives meaning and grace and admirableness to national success is losing its sway over us. Though this great Leviathan, whose completed century we celebrate, be indeed hugest of all commonwealths that have breasted the flood of time, its vast bulk will only stand revealed as more ugly, more clumsy, more preposterous, if it simply drift on the sleepy drench of private, selfish interests and sordid cares.

In discussing this question let us not forget the wider meaning with which the phrase "educated class" has become invested. With men of exceptional

eminence in the selecter walks of literature and science we are not concerned. That absorbing devotion to a pursuit by which alone its supreme prizes are purchased, carries with it, in most cases, a corresponding sacrifice of aptitude for other callings; and the familiar instances in which some of our foremost men of letters have entered with success the political arena must be reckoned as brilliant exceptions to the rule. The habits of the study are not the best discipline for affairs, however true the maxim of Bacon, that no kind of men love business for itself but those that are learned. Experience has shown that the intellectual qualities which insure success in the discovery of truth are rarely combined with the qualities which lend these truths their greatest practical efficiency. The service which original genius renders society in other ways far more than compensate for any injury which its renunciation of ordinary duties may involve. The world lost nothing by leaving Adam Smith in a professor's chair, and gained nothing by giving La Place a minister's portfolio. By the term "educated class," I have in mind that much larger number who form the mediating term between the intellectual leaders of the community and the great majority; the interpreters and expounders of principles which others have explored; the liberal connection, so adequately represented here to-day, not of the learned professions only, but of men generously inured, by the discipline of such an ancient university as this, to just opinions, and sincere speech, and independent action; whose scholarship is the gracious apparel of well-compacted character. In this wider sense, while the phrase implies educated intellect and educated taste, it implies

even more, educated judgment and educated conscience, those sovereign qualities which are usurped by no single calling, but belong to man as man, — to man in the most beneficent play of his faculties, in the ripest growth of his reason, and in the widest scope of his influence. This is the class through whom the impulses of sound culture are disseminated, and whose alienation from public interests is a sign of such evil portent on our political horizon.

In our own case this lessening interest of the educated class in politics is more significant when we recall the fact that politics once disputed with theology the sway over the most vigorous thought among us. Without doubt this modification may be traced, in part, to the operation of general social causes; but I can by no means consent to their opinion who would find its main explanation here. That the interests of society are far more diversified to-day than a century ago, that the speculative problems pressing for solution are vastly more numerous and complex, that the most adventuresome and prolific intellectual energy of our time no longer expends itself on those questions which in former ages exercised such potent fascination, no man will deny; yet this spurring of mental activity in new directions need not have caused its zeal to flag in the old. Is it not the prerogative of all genuine impulse to quicken a common movement? Does not success in one field rouse to new effort in every other? I would not include in this the wild pursuit of wealth, the vulgar materialism, of which in recent years we have had such shocking examples, and within whose poisoned circle all generous aspiration withers; the rivalry which I am here discussing

is the rivalry of intellectual forces. Can social progress, in this sense, involve any such result as is here alleged? Can there be any real antagonism between the study of nature and the study of man; between investigations of the laws printed on the heavens and the laws by which society advances and great and durable states are built up? When science, ceasing to speak as a child, published through Newton decrees that claimed obedience beyond the flaming walls of space, did it chill the interest of Locke in those inquiries which scattered such prolific seeds in the soil of this new world? The last century was in France an epoch of prodigious scientific movement; but in what period were social and political problems ever more keenly debated? The country that made its boast of a Buffon and a Lavoisier, could point not less to a Montesquieu and a Turgot. Nay; in the same person the two tendencies were sometimes seen combined, and the precocious genius of Condorcet was busied equally with the differential calculus, and with the foundations of human society. After reaching almost the highest distinction as a mathematician, he declared, "that for thirty years he had hardly passed a day without meditating on the political sciences." If, therefore, our educated class has lost the interest it once felt for political problems, this result must be ascribed to something else than our stimulated zeal for physical studies. And if we can no longer say with Algernon Sydney, that political questions "so far concern all mankind, that besides the influence on our future life they may be said to comprehend all that in this world deserves to be cared for," they certainly have not lost their importance as the great issues of modern society are more distinctly revealed.