

Chapter VI.

General Considerations On The Social Science.

§ 1. Next after the science of individual man comes the science of man in society--of the actions of collective masses of mankind, and the various phenomena which constitute social life.

If the formation of individual character is already a complex subject of study, this subject must be, in appearance at least, still more complex; because the number of concurrent causes, all exercising more or less influence on the total effect, is greater, in the proportion in which a nation, or the species at large, exposes a larger surface to the operation of agents, psychological and physical, than any single individual. If it was necessary to prove, in opposition to an existing prejudice, that the simpler of the two is capable of being a subject of science, the prejudice is likely to be yet stronger against the possibility of giving a scientific character to the study of Politics, and of the phenomena of Society. It is, accordingly, but of yesterday that the conception of a political or social science has existed anywhere but in the mind of here and there an insulated thinker, generally very ill prepared for its realization: though the subject itself has of all others engaged the most general attention, and been a theme of interested and earnest discussions, almost from the beginning of recorded time.

The condition, indeed, of politics as a branch of knowledge was, until very lately, and has scarcely even yet ceased to be, that which Bacon animadverted on, as the natural state of the sciences while their cultivation is abandoned to practitioners; not being carried on as a branch of speculative inquiry, but only with a view to the exigencies of daily practice, and the *fructifera experimenta*, therefore, being aimed at, almost to the exclusion of the *lucifera*. Such was medical investigation, before physiology and natural history began to be cultivated as branches of general knowledge. The only questions examined were, what diet is wholesome, or what medicine will cure some given disease; without any previous systematic inquiry into the laws of nutrition, and of the healthy and morbid action of the different organs, on which laws the effect of any diet or medicine must evidently depend. And in politics the questions which engaged general attention were similar: Is such an enactment, or such a form of government, beneficial or the reverse--either universally, or to some particular community? without any previous inquiry into the general conditions by which the operation of legislative measures, or the effects produced by forms of government, are determined. Students in politics thus attempted to study the pathology and therapeutics of the social body, before they had laid the necessary foundation in its physiology; to cure disease without understanding the laws of health. And the result was such as it must always be when persons, even of ability, attempt to deal with the complex questions of a science before its simpler and more elementary truths have been established.

No wonder that, when the phenomena of society have so rarely been contemplated in the point of view characteristic of science, the philosophy of society should have made little progress; should contain few general propositions sufficiently precise and certain for common inquirers to recognize in them a scientific character. The vulgar notion accordingly is, that all pretension to lay down general truths on politics and society is quackery; that no universality and no certainty are attainable in such matters. What partly excuses this common notion is, that it is really not without foundation in one particular sense. A large proportion of those who have laid claim to the character of philosophic politicians have attempted not to ascertain universal sequences, but to frame universal precepts. They have imagined some one form of government, or system of laws, to fit all cases--a pretension well meriting the ridicule with which it is treated by practitioners, and wholly unsupported by the analogy of the art to which, from the nature of its subject, that of politics must be the most nearly allied. No one now supposes it possible that one remedy can cure all diseases, or even the same disease in all constitutions and habits of body.

It is not necessary even to the perfection of a science, that the corresponding art should possess universal, or even general, rules. The phenomena of society might not only be completely dependent on known causes, but the mode of action of all those causes might be reducible to laws of considerable simplicity, and yet no two

cases might admit of being treated in precisely the same manner. So great might be the variety of circumstances on which the results in different cases depend, that the art might not have a single general precept to give, except that of watching the circumstances of the particular case, and adapting our measures to the effects which, according to the principles of the science, result from those circumstances. But although, in so complicated a class of subjects, it is impossible to lay down practical maxims of universal application, it does not follow that the phenomena do not conform to universal laws.

§ 2. All phenomena of society are phenomena of human nature, generated by the action of outward circumstances upon masses of human beings; and if, therefore, the phenomena of human thought, feeling, and action are subject to fixed laws, the phenomena of society can not but conform to fixed laws, the consequence of the preceding. There is, indeed, no hope that these laws, though our knowledge of them were as certain and as complete as it is in astronomy, would enable us to predict the history of society, like that of the celestial appearances, for thousands of years to come. But the difference of certainty is not in the laws themselves, it is in the data to which these laws are to be applied. In astronomy the causes influencing the result are few, and change little, and that little according to known laws; we can ascertain what they are now, and thence determine what they will be at any epoch of a distant future. The data, therefore, in astronomy are as certain as the laws themselves. The circumstances, on the contrary, which influence the condition and progress of society are innumerable, and perpetually changing; and though they all change in obedience to causes, and therefore to laws, the multitude of the causes is so great as to defy our limited powers of calculation. Not to say that the impossibility of applying precise numbers to facts of such a description would set an impassable limit to the possibility of calculating them beforehand, even if the powers of the human intellect were otherwise adequate to the task.

But, as before remarked, an amount of knowledge quite insufficient for prediction, may be most valuable for guidance. The science of society would have attained a very high point of perfection if it enabled us, in any given condition of social affairs, in the condition, for instance, of Europe or any European country at the present time, to understand by what causes it had, in any and every particular, been made what it was; whether it was tending to any, and to what, changes; what effects each feature of its existing state was likely to produce in the future; and by what means any of those effects might be prevented, modified, or accelerated, or a different class of effects superinduced. There is nothing chimerical in the hope that general laws, sufficient to enable us to answer these various questions for any country or time with the individual circumstances of which we are well acquainted, do really admit of being ascertained; and that the other branches of human knowledge, which this undertaking presupposes, are so far advanced that the time is ripe for its commencement. Such is the object of the Social Science.

That the nature of what I consider the true method of the science may be made more palpable, by first showing what that method is not, it will be expedient to characterize briefly two radical misconceptions of the proper mode of philosophizing on society and government, one or other of which is, either explicitly or more often unconsciously, entertained by almost all who have meditated or argued respecting the logic of politics, since the notion of treating it by strict rules, and on Baconian principles, has been current among the more advanced thinkers. These erroneous methods, if the word method can be applied to erroneous tendencies arising from the absence of any sufficiently distinct conception of method, may be termed the Experimental, or Chemical, mode of investigation, and the Abstract, or Geometrical, mode. We shall begin with the former.