Chapter XII

The Ancient Cycle of Prenational Empire-Building — The Modern Cycle of Nation-Building

WE HAVE seen that the building of the true national unit was a problem of human aggregation left over by the ancient world to the mediaeval. The ancient world started from the tribe, the city state, the clan, the small regional state — all of them minor units living in the midst of other like units which were similar to them in general type, kin usually in language and most often or very largely in race, marked off at least from other divisions of humanity by a tendency towards a common civilisation and protected in that community with each other and in their diversity from others by favourable geographical circumstances. Thus Greece, Italy, Gaul, Egypt, China, Medo-Persia, India, Arabia, Israel, all began with a loose cultural and geographical aggregation which made them separate and distinct culture-units before they could become nation-units. Within that loose unity the tribe, clan or city or regional states formed in the vague mass so many points of distinct, vigorous and compact unity which felt indeed more and more powerfully the divergence and opposition of their larger cultural oneness to the outside world but could feel also and often much more nearly and acutely their own divergences, contrasts and oppositions. Where this sense of local distinctness was most acute, there the problem of national unification was necessarily more difficult and its solution, when made, tended to be more illusory.

The solution was in most cases attempted. In Egypt and Judaea it was successfully found even in that ancient cycle of historical evolution; but in the latter instance certainly, in the former probably, the full result came only by the hard discipline of subjection to a foreign yoke. Where this discipline was
lacking, where the nation-unity was in some sort achieved from within,—usually through the conquest of all the rest by one strong clan, city, regional unit such as Rome, Macedon, the mountain clans of Persia,—the new State, instead of waiting to base firmly its achievement and lay the foundations of the national unity deep and strong, proceeded at once to overshoot its immediate necessity and embark on a career of conquest. Before the psychological roots of the national unity had been driven deep, before the nation was firmly self-conscious, irresistibly possessed of its oneness and invincibly attached to it, the governing State impelled by the military impulsion which had carried it so far attempted immediately to form by the same means a larger empire-aggregate. Assyria, Macedon, Rome, Persia, later on Arabia followed all the same tendency and the same cycle. The great invasion of Europe and Western Asia by the Gaelic race and the subsequent disunion and decline of Gaul were probably due to the same phenomenon and proceeded from a still more immature and ill-formed unification than the Macedonian. All became the starting-point of great empire-movements before they had become the keystone of securely built national unities.

These empires, therefore, could not endure. Some lasted longer than others because they had laid down firmer foundations in the central nation-unity, as did Rome in Italy. In Greece Philip, the first unifier, made a rapid but imperfect sketch of unification, the celerity of which had been made possible by the previous and yet looser Spartan domination; and had he been followed by successors of a patient talent rather than by a man of vast imagination and supreme genius, this first rough practical outline might have been filled in, strengthened and an enduring work achieved. One who first founds on a large scale and rapidly, needs always as his successor a man with the talent or the genius for organisation rather than an impetus for expansion. A Caesar followed by an Augustus meant a work of massive durability; a Philip followed by an Alexander an achievement of great importance to the world by its results, but in itself a mere splendour of short-lived brilliance. Rome, to whom careful Nature denied any man of commanding genius
until she had firmly unified Italy and laid the basis of her empire, was able to build much more firmly; nevertheless, she founded that empire not as the centre and head of a great nation, but still as a dominant city using a subject Italy for the springing-board to leap upon and subjugate the surrounding world. Therefore she had to face a much more difficult problem of assimilation, that of nation-nebulae and formed or inchoate cultures different from her own, before she had achieved and learned to apply to the new problem the art of complete and absolute unification on a smaller and easier scale, before she had welded into one living national organism, no longer Roman but Italian, the elements of difference and community offered by the Gallic, Latin, Umbrian, Oscan and Graeco-Apulian factors in ancient Italy. Therefore, although her empire endured for several centuries, it achieved temporary conservation at the cost of energy of vitality and inner vigour; it accomplished neither the nation-unit nor the durable empire-unity, and like other ancient empires it had to collapse and make room for a new era of true nation-building.

It is necessary to emphasise where the error lay. The administrative, political, economic organisation of mankind in aggregates of smaller or greater size is a work which belongs at its basis to the same order of phenomena as the creation of vital organisms in physical Nature. It uses, that is to say, primarily external and physical methods governed by the principles of physical life-energy intent on the creation of living forms, although its inner object is to deliver, to manifest and to bring into secure working a supraphysical, a psychological principle latent behind the operations of the life and the body. To build a strong and durable body and vital functioning for a distinct, powerful, well-centred and well-diffused corporate ego is its whole aim and method. In this process, as we have seen, first smaller distinct units in a larger loose unity are formed; these have a strong psychological existence and a well-developed body and vital functioning, but in the larger mass the psychological sense and the vital energy are present but unorganised and without power of definite functioning, and the body is a fluid quantity or a half-nebulous or at most a half-fluid, half-solidified mass,
a plasm rather than a body. This has in its turn to be formed and organised; a firm physical shape has to be made for it, a well-defined vital functioning and a clear psychological reality, self-consciousness and mental will-to-be.

Thus a new larger unity is formed; and this again finds itself among a number of similar unities which it looks on first as hostile and quite different from itself, then enters into a sort of community in difference with them, till again we find repeated the original phenomenon of a number of smaller distinct units in a wider loose unity. The contained units are larger and more complex than before, the containing unity is also larger and more complex than before, but the essential position is the same and a similar problem presents itself for solution. Thus in the beginning there was the phenomenon of city states and regional peoples coexisting as disunited parts of a loose geographical and cultural unity, Italy or Hellas, and there was the problem of creating the Hellenic or Italian nation. Afterwards there came instead the phenomenon of nation-units formed or in formation coexisting as disunited parts of the loose geographical and cultural unity, first, of Christendom, then, of Europe, and with it the problem of the union of this Christendom or of this Europe which, though more than once conceived by individual statesmen or political thinkers, was never achieved nor even the first steps attempted. Before its difficulties could be solved, the modern movement with its unifying forces has presented to us the new and more complex phenomenon of a number of nation-units and empire-units embedded in the loose, but growing life-interdependence and commercial close-connection of mankind, and the attendant problem of the unification of mankind already overshadows the unfulfilled dream of the unification of Europe.

In physical Nature vital organisms cannot live entirely on themselves; they live either by interchange with other vital organisms or partly by that interchange and partly by devouring others; for these are the processes of assimilation common to separated physical life. In unification of life, on the other hand, an assimilation is possible which goes beyond this alternative of either the devouring of one by another or a continued separate
distinctness which limits assimilation to a mutual reception of the energies discharged by one life upon another. There can be instead an association of units consciously subordinating themselves to a general unity which is developed in the process of their coming together. Some of these, indeed, are killed and used as material for new elements, but all cannot be so treated, all cannot be devoured by one dominant unit; for in that case there is no unification, no creation of a larger unity, no continued greater life, but only a temporary survival of the devourer by the digestion and utilisation of the energy of the devoured. In the unification of human aggregates, this then is the problem, how the component units shall be subordinated to a new unity without their death and disappearance.

The weakness of the old empire-unities created by conquest was that they tended to destroy the smaller units they assimilated, as did imperial Rome, and to turn them into food for the life of the dominant organ. Gaul, Spain, Africa, Egypt were thus killed, turned into dead matter and their energy drawn into the centre, Rome; thus the empire became a great dying mass on which the life of Rome fed for several centuries. In such a method, however, the exhaustion of the life in the subject parts must end by leaving the dominant voracious centre without any source for new storage of energy. At first the best intellectual force of the conquered provinces flowed to Rome and their vital energy poured into it a great supply of military force and governing ability, but eventually both failed and first the intellectual energy of Rome and then its military and political ability died away in the midst of the general death. Nor would Roman civilisation have lived even for so long but for the new ideas and motives it received from the East. This interchange, however, had neither the vividness nor the constant flow which marks the incoming and the return of ever new tides of thought and motives of life in the modern world and it could not really revivify the low vitality of the imperial body nor even arrest very long the process of its decay. When the Roman grasp loosened, the world which it had held so firmly constricted had been for long a huge, decorous, magnificently organised death-in-life incapable of new
origination or self-regeneration; vitality could only be restored through the inrush of the vigorous barbarian world from the plains of Germany, the steppes beyond the Danube and the deserts of Arabia. Dissolution had to precede a movement of sounder construction.

In the mediaeval period of nation-building, we see Nature mending this earlier error. When we speak indeed of the errors of Nature, we use a figure illegitimately borrowed from our human psychology and experience; for in Nature there are no errors but only the deliberate measure of her paces traced and retraced in a prefigured rhythm, of which each step has a meaning and its place in the action and reaction of her gradual advance. The crushing domination of Roman uniformity was a device, not to kill out permanently, but to discourage in their excessive separative vitality the old smaller units, so that when they revived again they might not present an insuperable obstacle to the growth of a true national unity. What the mere nation-unity may lose by not passing through this cruel discipline,—we leave aside the danger it brings of an actual death like the Assyrian or Chaldean as well as the spiritual and other gains that may accrue by avoiding it,—is shown in the example of India where the Maurya, Gupta, Andhra, Moghul empires, huge and powerful and well-organised as they were, never succeeded in passing a steam-roller over the too strongly independent life of the subordinate unities from the village community to the regional or linguistic area. It has needed the pressure of a rule neither indigenous in origin nor locally centred, the dominance of a foreign nation entirely alien in culture and morally armoured against the sympathies and attractions of India's cultural atmosphere to do in a century this work which two thousand years of a looser imperialism had failed to accomplish. Such a process implies necessarily a cruel and often dangerous pressure and breaking up of old institutions; for Nature tired of the obstinate immobility of an age-long resistance seems to care little how many beautiful and valuable things are destroyed so long as her main end is accomplished: but we may be sure that if destruction is done, it is because for that end the destruction was indispensable.
In Europe, after the Roman pressure was removed, the city state and regional nation revived as elements of a new construction; but except in one country and curiously enough in Italy itself the city state offered no real resistance to the process of national unification. We may ascribe its strong resuscitation in Italy to two circumstances, first, to the premature Roman oppression of the ancient free city-life of Italy before it had realised its full potentialities and, secondly, to its survival in seed both by the prolonged civil life of Rome itself and by the persistence in the Italian municipia of a sense of separate life, oppressed but never quite ground out of existence as was the separate clan-life of Gaul and Spain or the separate city-life of Greece. Thus psychologically the Italian city state neither died satisfied and fulfilled nor was broken up beyond recall; it revived in new incarnations. And this revival was disastrous to the nation-life of Italy, though an incalculable boon and advantage to the culture and civilisation of the world; for as the city-life of Greece had originally created, so the city-life of Italy recovered, renewed and gave in a new form to our modern times the art, literature, thought and science of the Graeco-Roman world. Elsewhere, the city-unit revived only in the shape of the free or half-free municipalities of mediaeval France, Flanders and Germany; and these were at no time an obstacle to unification, but rather helped to form a subconscious basis for it and in the meanwhile to prevent by rich impulses and free movement of thought and art the mediaeval tendency to intellectual uniformity, stagnation and obscurcation.

The old clan-nation perished, except in countries like Ireland and Northern and Western Scotland which had not undergone the Roman pressure, and there it was as fatal to unification as the city state in Italy; it prevented Ireland from evolving an organised unity and the Highland Celts from amalgamating with the Anglo-Celtic Scotch nation until the yoke of England passed over them and did what the Roman rule would have done if it had not been stayed in its expansion by the Grampians and the Irish seas. In the rest of Western Europe, the work done by the Roman rule was so sound that even the domination of the
Western countries by the tribal nations of Germany failed to revive the old strongly marked and obstinately separative clan-nation. It created in its stead the regional kingdoms of Germany and the feudal and provincial divisions of France and Spain; but it was only in Germany, which like Ireland and the Scotch highlands had not endured the Roman yoke, that this regional life proved a serious obstacle to unification. In France it seemed for a time to prevent it, but in reality it resisted only long enough to make itself of value as an element of richness and variation in the final French unity. The unexampled perfection of that unity is a sign of the secret wisdom concealed in the prolonged process we watch through the history of France which seems to a superficial glance so miserable and distracted, so long an alternation of anarchy with feudal or monarchic despotism, so different from the gradual, steady and much more orderly development of the national life of England. But in England the necessary variation and richness of the ultimate organism was otherwise provided for by the great difference of the races that formed the new nation and by the persistence of Wales, Ireland and Scotland as separate cultural units with a subordinate self-consciousness of their own in the larger unity.

The European cycle of nation-building differs therefore from the ancient cycle which led from the regional and city state to the empire, first, in its not overshooting itself by proceeding towards a larger unification to the neglect of the necessary intermediate aggregate, secondly, in its slow and ripening progression through three successive stages by which unity was secured and yet the constituent elements not killed nor prematurely nor unduly oppressed by the instruments of unification. The first stage progressed through a long balancing of centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in which the feudal system provided a principle of order and of a loose but still organic unity. The second was a movement of unification and increasing uniformity in which certain features of the ancient imperial system of Rome were repeated, but with a less crushing force and exhausting tendency. It was marked first by the creation of a metropolitan centre which began to draw to it, like Rome, the best life-
energies of all the other parts. A second feature was the growth of an absolute sovereign authority whose function was to impose a legal, administrative, political and linguistic uniformity and centralisation on the national life. A third sign of this movement was the establishment of a governing spiritual head and body which served to impose a similar uniformity of religious thought and intellectual education and opinion. This unifying pressure too far pursued might have ended disastrously like the Roman but for a third stage of revolt and diffusion which broke or subordinated these instruments, feudalism, monarchy, Church authority as soon as their work had been done and substituted a new movement directed towards the diffusion of the national life through a strong and well-organised political, legal, social and cultural freedom and equality. Its trend has been to endeavour that as in the ancient city, so in the modern nation, all classes and all individuals should enjoy the benefits and participate in the free energy of the released national existence.

This third stage of national life enjoys the advantages of unity and sufficient uniformity created by the second and is able to safely utilise anew the possibilities of regional and city-life saved from entire destruction by the first. By these gradations of national progress, it has been made increasingly possible for our modern times to envisage, if and where it is willed or needed, the idea of a federated nation or federal empire based securely upon a fundamental and well-realised psychological unity: this indeed was already achieved in a simple type in Germany and in America. Also we can move now safely, if we will, towards a partial decentralisation through subordinate governments, communes and provincial cities which may help to cure the malady of an excessive metropolitan absorption of the best national energies and facilitate their free circulation through many centres andplexuses. At the same time, we contemplate the organised use of a State intelligently representative of the whole conscious, active, vitalised nation as a means for the perfection of the life of the individual and the community. This is the point which the development of the nation-aggregate has reached at the moment when we are again confronted either, according to future
trends, with the wider problem of the imperial aggregate or the still vaster problems created by the growing cultural unity and commercial and political interdependence of all mankind.