

Carlsbad 1819

Like another Chouannerie

Charles Reemelin's critical review of American politics (1881)

October 31, 2017 by Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur

[Best read as an appendix to the previous article on electoral violence.]

Charles Reemelin was a man who hated America. Not out of envy, spite or hatred, but out of in-depth personal experience. Sure, he insisted on simply being a patriot who sought to deliver America from the tyranny of partyism, but the subtext is obvious, especially in his case. On the other hand, his vision of what America's political future ought to be was, sans a few of his Teutonic eccentricities, on the money in terms of predictive ability. He can be regarded as one of the most adroit and cultivated apostles of the managerial class, with a penchant for citing the primary sources of the new cameralism he endorsed — Lorenz von Stein, Wilhelm Roscher and Rudolf von Gneist, to name a few. Born Karl Gustav Rümelin in 1814, he emigrated in 1832 and embarked on a political career leading up to the Ohio Senate.

A strong opponent of nativism, he very much regarded America as a nation of immigrants. "Here is a land, where no man need be a foreigner, where, indeed, foreigners are countrymen," he summarized America's message to the world. He looked forward to an increasingly international world, free of "those who nurse their clannishness, often from purely imaginary superiorities." No doubt our HBD nerds with their maps showing rates of consanguinity would agree. They would also probably agree with Reemelin's almost declaring the Chinese to be the master race. (<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924030481984#page/n245/mode/2up>).

Yet to judge him by this aspect of his character alone is highly misleading. For all of his passionate opposition to nativism, he no less forcefully detested abolitionism (he was in favor of a colonization/repatriation society, and stated that "negro liberty exhibits most pointedly a general voting prostitution"), feminism, democracy... and America.

He does not mince his words: newspapers and parties run the country by graft, or the "mutually corrupting system of suffrage and office-hunting" as he calls it, his two eternal bugbears; the Founding Fathers were all misguided (sans Washington, perhaps); the Constitution is a fatally flawed document in not establishing a proper parliamentary republic; the masses are more contemptible than any absolute

monarch; Lincoln was incompetent and the Civil War a tragicomedy; the press is a new priesthood; a "Calvinism of the John Knox type" as he calls it prevails in the form of manifest destiny and a general fatalism mixed with a lack of caution, etc. etc.

He summarizes the U.S. presidencies

(<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924030481984#page/n473/mode/2up>) by that point as in consistent decline, starting with the apex of Washington, who, in his words, was sincerely for the constitutional conjunctive public will, followed by Hamilton who would have had less popular eccentricity in it; where Adams desired a freer administration; Jefferson wanted less federal authority and more state sovereignty; Madison wavered between Jefferson, Monroe, and Hamilton, and followed precedents; John Quincy Adams prevaricated between old federalism and new republicanism; Jackson would have established a democracy, that was neither in the Constitution nor in his own mind, well defined; and Van Buren, the first child of it, became its first victim. And after that, Tyler, Polk, Taylor, Pierce, and Buchanan were but feebly rowing against a stream, that was rapidly running them into a catastrophe. Lincoln, the President whose good sense and kind disposition would have restored the Constitution, but whose fatalism foiled his intentions, became a gravedigger, where he would have been a resurrectionist.

He diagnoses the root issue as chronic kinglessness, for in America "our actual public life is still but a protracted quarrel about the distribution of power and its emoluments." That a government governed by public opinion is no government at all

(<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924030481984#page/n523/mode/2up>), but "incessant disputations." Certainly, he says, America has its elections, executives, administrations, a Congress, legislatures, judiciaries, armies, penitentiaries, jails, taxes, public improvements, and the various municipalities, and public debts to go. But no government. The fact that the journalists constantly yell about incipient monarchy, aristocracy or plutocracy lying in America's institutions, is indicative precisely of America's governmental ambiguity. Indeed, the country was not an organic society, for it had not evolved a wise public will or a good polity, and thus was not (<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924030481984#page/n531/mode/2up>) "a political government in the right sense."

The anarchy of partyism and patronage had created a lot of scapegoats

(<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924030481984#page/n587/mode/2up>) in American politics:

American society had then on its hands, what it had clamored for so long, a not-governing government; but it did not perceive it, for it was told, that it had still to overcome two ruling forces, that existed in derogation of popular rule, to wit: slavery and the Catholic Church. And, as if to justify this nonsense, both these institutions had furnished plausible reasons for the imputation. We have already mentioned the repeal of the Missouri Compromise as one of these causes. The other consisted in the efforts of Catholics to place into the presidential chair men, whom, in consequence of their having Catholic wives or for other covert reasons, they believed to be friendly to the Church. How sensitive and how prepared for tumult, the public mind was, could be glaringly seen in the burning of churches in Philadelphia and the bloody riots of Louisville. The raid of John Brown on Harper's Ferry, with his execution, both senseless acts, showeth besides, that America had its knight-errantry, but no Cervantes to hold it up to ridicule. Frauds and browbeating, at elections, the sure forerunners of bloody scenes, proved that, the real republican public virtue was gone, and that the ballot-box was now but an offensive weapon in political warfare. We had reached the perilous condition, when ambition has plenty of tools ready to serve it, provided that pecuniary consideration can be supplied. What Gibbon said of Rome applied to America: "Her enemies were within her own bosom."

And what furnished these tools to ambition ? Was it in truth Slavery, or the Catholic Church, or Great Britain, or the banks, or the immigrants, or liquor, or the sceptics, or any of the causes, that were paraded as such before the public in the press and by public speakers?

The answer to him is clearly negative. The real issue was unscrupulous office-seekers in federal, state and municipal governments under the heels of partisan upheaval. The cure, "is it not plain," lay in the taking away of arbitrary appointments and removals, and substituting technical education and discipline, and general as well as special qualification, as preconditions to entering and remaining in the public service.

Complaints about "bureaucracy" and "red tape" were immaterial to him, for the alternative was the "meanest of all tyrannies, party slavery." Standing parties are worse than standing armies. Governing and administering are two different things, he says. Presidents, governors, mayors and so forth are fine to be under popular influence. But the judiciary, the clerks, inspectors, etc. must be shielded from it all costs. "Is it not, because the large majority of voters cast their suffrages from favoritism and prejudice?"

The civil service to Reemelin constituted, following (<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924030481984#page/n339/mode/2up>), "the minds of the great jurists and political scientists of our age" (many of them German, some mentioned above), *the conservers of the ethics of the country*. They start from grammar schools, work up to high schools, academies and universities; and then enter the public service by merit and qualification. But the American public has been duped into thinking that a body of trained officials is this danger to liberty called "bureaucracy." But in truth, such a corps of officials is much less obsequious to those in power, and a check on "office-seeking and voting" as national passions.

Of the Founders, he remarks that though it would be wrong to charge upon them an intent to erect centralized party government, that they did it, and that they made appointments and elections subject to arbitrary motives, "is an unquestionable fact." Between Hamilton's inauguration of the parties "that have divided and misdirected us ever since," followed by Adams and Jefferson, an honorably free yet law-obedient public administration of public affairs has been lost.

He faults the Constitution at the time as a whole for supplying a reactive and not a proactive framework. The Senate may reject appointments after they are sent in, but as a body, it is not consulted in the formation of the presidential judgment. The House and Senate's powers of impeachment and trial, too, are post facto ones. There are no ministries, no motions, and so no power to secure present responsibility for the President and his cabinet. His desire for a permanent civil service would be a major step in creating a new equilibrium, of course.

Nevertheless, Reemelin was glad to be a strict constructionist when it was suitable (<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924030481984#page/n175/mode/2up>):

We must never forget that American party governments are not constitutional; their title to rule is not derived from law, they rest on force as their legitimation, if legitimation they can have at all.

A Russian statesman said, in an address to the Czar : "Outside of treaties there is no law for Europe except force." So we may say for the United States, that all government outside of the Constitution, which is but the highest form of a treaty, rests only on force. Our parties are outside of the Constitution, and, unconsciously to themselves, they have ever been sliding towards a more corrupt and also a more violent use of force. The mass meetings, with processions, music, cannon, &c., were but the initiatory steps in the display of forces, the election frauds, and other wrongs, and the civil war of 1861 was the logical culmination. Alternations of parties are but alternations in absolutely wrong procedures.

Speaking of the Civil War, the fruits of it were, by his tally. (<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924030481984#page/n235/mode/2up>): "a disordered currency, paper money, legal tender acts, outrageous taxation, corruption in high places, even in the White House, election frauds, soldier voting, negro suffrage, carpet bagging, negro vagabondism, a disintegrated southern society, protective tariffs, crippled shipbuilding, and a foreign commerce in foreign bottoms; a demoralized public service, a President counted in, and holding on under cover of good intentions!"

Reemelin declares: "The best status of mankind in morals, laws, and wealth can be reached only in a society, which measures its present wants by the standards of experience recorded in books and learning of all kinds, but which also lifts itself out of the old ruts *by the help of progressive science*." For this, the Rechtsstaat. The inchoate politics of America are its opposite, a mere counting of heads or arbitrary wills. A true government of law requires the cooperation of society with culture through universities (!), deliberative assemblies, independent judiciaries, and free executives, "in the formation and execution of an intelligent, virtuous, wise, collective will."

The more one tried to avoid this for the, what he calls, "fallacy of the hope to escape corruption and despotism by having a minimum of government, and *it* neglected and unwatched," the more public robbery and avarice one would observe.

As to the press, Chuck Reemelin quipped that the Irishman who heard America designated as "the newspaper nation" and wanted to know whether the country belonged to the newspapers, or the newspapers to the country, was in point.

The wide variety of suffixes for papers illustrate to him (<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924030481984#page/n187/mode/2up>) the wide divergences as to their intent:

Those who thought of it only as the humble successor of the Roman *Acta Diurna* called it "Diurnal" (the name of the first London paper), changed afterwards to the French word "Journal." Those, for whom it was but a newsboy, gave it the appellation of a little coin called "Gazette;" while those for whom it was to be a mediator between heaven and earth, gave it the name of the ancient God of merchants and thieves — "Mercury." And those who felt, that it would be the Atlas of time, named it Tithing in English, Zeitung in German, Le Temps in French. In modern times, when its vocation, to serve trade, became known and appreciated, it borrowed modifications of the word Commerce. And thus we might go on and show in names the ever-changing ideas and conceptions of its character and uses. We instance: "Friend of Truth," "People's Echo," "Citizen of the World," "Tribune," "Phoenix," "Commoner," &c., down to the proverb: "He lies like print." We have often wondered that none have borrowed their idea and name for their press from the rainbow, whose variegated colors, suddenness of appearance and disappearance, and multifariousness of surmises, in regard to it, so much resembles it. We are told that the original prototypes of the writers and contributors are to be sought in the old minstrels, the ballad-singers, the poets, dramatists, and play-actors, and we are not at all sure which of the two, the ancient or the modern type, have a right to be offended or gratified at the comparison.

Chuck Reemelin had a proposal for nipping these printers in the bud ("protect society against the press autocrats," in his own words) without technically treading on democratic commitments to liberty of the press.

Have the governments crowd them out by disbursing easily accessible daily reports of their activities. This does not involve nationalizing anything per se, simply getting Caesar to declare what is Caesar's without hundreds of intermediaries garbling his messages on the way. Make governmental news as mundane as weather reports:

Do we not all see, that it requires only an extension and perfection of the methods already in practical operation, so as to make them more economical as well as efficient, to give this people the very mental action they need? We have' governors' messages, reports of cabinet officers, et id omne genus. Why will we stick fast in these annual summaries; why not have monthly — yea, weekly — nay, why not daily statements? That they are wanted is evidenced by the daily interviews of our Presidents, Secretaries of the Treasury, &c. Must these public men for ever wear the reporter's mask? Must the public always see through such spectacles? Why not have direct open communications? Why not have bulletins open to all? Yea, we make bold to ask: Are there not matters, which all papers should be compelled to publish? Other governments, and they are of the better sort, are taking this direction. Why not we, in modes suitable to our institutions? Should not the associated press telegrams be an organization free to all on easy terms, just like the weather reports?

Alas, that one didn't seem to pan out correctly. Rather than government bulletins crowding out the press, instead the press became the wire service of the government. White House Press Secretary under JFK and LBJ, Pierre E.G. Salinger, shares some insider scoop (<https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKOH-PES-01.aspx>) in a 1965 oral history interview.

But next to parties, Reemelin's greatest ire was reserved for the ballot box.

The eternal law of the ballot box, he says, is that it must either be stolen or suppressed. "We have to learn that the ballot-box is an attempt to make equal what has a right to be unequal, and that it is a suppression of superiority, which is just as wrong, as was the ancient suppression of the working elements of society."

So onerous is this system that even the lotto is preferable. For at least the lotto has a selection process as to whose names end up in the box. The ballot, in contrast has no such precaution — “on the contrary, universal qualification for office, and the prevalent ill-will to men of moral vigor and good capacities, makes it almost certain that incompetent men will receive the preference.”

Its intense multiplication for candidates of office makes it costly also, which causes Reemelin to quip that (<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924030481984#page/n199/mode/2up>). “no royal, no priestly, no aristocratic method of filling the public stations was ever half as expensive as ours, and none ever placed as many wrong men in power as this, our ballot-box.”

Surely then, Chuck wants to go back to one of them royal, priestly and aristocratic methods?

No, but he has an interesting solution nevertheless.

He wants to expand the category of the vote (<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924030481984#page/n201/mode/2up>), from simple per capita numerical quantities to qualitatively significant indices. Among other measures, it would involve a per-household family vote, an idea popular with some traditionalists in our time:

The first step in the right direction is the understanding, that, organized by and in the hands of statistical scientific officers, the ballot-box may be made a self-recording political census, that would give us, in speaking figures, the inchoate public will, so that a mistake as to the value of votes in the political (using the word in its best sense) scale would be almost impossible. We cannot go into details, but may state the general principle upon which this improved ballot-box should be based, to wit : that there shall be not only individual (mere per capita) votes cast, but also interest, class, and family votes, or if you please joint-votes of husband and wife, dependent on the consent of both; that the procedures shall be varied to the township, county, state, and United States, and in time and place, by age, occupation, and profession, even as to specific interests. In brief, that every vote cast shall not be a mere numerical entity, but carry with it its actual value to government. No fair-minded citizen can object to a system that gives him all the weight he deserves.

Well...

None of that ever happened.

Chuck Reemelin in a nutshell, folks.

The *Critical Review of American Politics* (1881) is a very good book. It's one of those really valuable time capsules from a highly erudite and well-read person who perfectly anticipated some aspects of the future, and was horribly off about others, but nevertheless in ways that made perfect sense for his goals. Reemelin got his beloved permanent government isolated from partyarchy, but for all his distaste of “feudal” patronage, an anarchy of the executive branch (<https://carlsbad1819.wordpress.com/2017/08/19/rough-edges-of-the-new-deal-revolution/>), was put in its place. The *Critical Review* is valuable also because, unlike many of his contemporaries, Reemelin did not pretend to be following any American traditions or continuity thereof. He is openly disdainful of America's political “accomplishments” (to him, virtually none) and makes it clear that foreign ideas of political science must be imported. As such, the book's great deal of honesty is useful to more accurately pinpoint just what happened to American government post-Reconstruction. At the same time, his

staunch patriarchalism and skewering alike of abolitionists and fire-eaters, of Whigs and Republicans, of American Schoolers and locofocos, make many of his historical interpretations of the events in 19th century American politics both heterodox and fascinating.

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