

"A STRANGE EXPERIENCE IN 1925"

Ansprache am Swarthmore College 1960 über erste Eindrücke in Amerika von
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Mr. President, Colleagues and Students of Swarthmore:

I should like to talk to you about a strange experience which I had in 1925. I was then in this country as a visiting professor. You could not really readily understand my story without knowing about its background, the United States as I saw it for the first time -- I repeat: in 1925. Since then, you will realize, this country has changed in the most extraordinary fashion. If, in 1925, Europeans knew little about the States -- I knew practically nothing when I arrived -- most Americans did not know much more about Europe, -- although American divisions had helped the British and the French to win the first World War. Compared with the present situation, what we may call the functional distance between America and Europe was still enormous. Not many people crossed the Atlantic and, when a German professor landed in New York, the rare bird from abroad was promptly interviewed by representatives of the American press. Who cares now - when the Europeans arrive practically in droves, and when each summer huge numbers of Americans travel in Europe.

Before I came, I had spent six years in Spanish Africa. Being so much farther away, I thought, this remote America will be at least as exotic and strange as that part of Africa. My romantic expectations were seriously disappointed when I first walked along some streets in New York City. To be sure, there were the skyscrapers and, even then, a great many automobiles. But people looked more or less like people in Central Europe, they were dressed the same way, and -- there were no Indians on Fifth Avenue. I was further disappointed when I saw no fundamental difference between the vegetations, the trees and bushes here and those in Germany. Surely, Africa has been far more romantic.

My next discovery was New England. I was expected to teach at a small university in Massachusetts. Here I became acquainted with landscapes of extraordinary beauty, and I promptly fell in love with them. This was late in the winter; I had never seen such a blue sky, above so much white snow, and never such enormous apparently untouched forests. And how could days be quite so bright even in March? I studied the situation and found (what I had not known) that the latitude of New York corresponds more or less to that of such European places as Madrid and Rome or Naples. Needless to say, I was even more impressed by what I saw a bit later, when I travelled all over the States. Quite apart from such spectacular views as the Teton Range and the big volcanoes in the far West, what an enormous country -- and how fresh an untamed it all was -- and empty! For hours and hours you sometimes hardly saw

a house from the window of your railroad car. Barely 115 million people then lived in the States, and Germany had <only> half as many who lived in an area smaller than the one State of Texas. In Wyoming, I once asked a farmer whether he ever lost his way in these vast empty areas. "No," he answered, "I never lose my way - although it may happen that, for a day or two, my horse and I are a bit bewildered." -

I was inclined to believe that some characteristics of the American people could be explained in this fashion: They had barely had time to think of human problems which worried most people in Europe. Were the Americans still busy adapting themselves to the incredible possibilities of their tremendous country? And had they learned to be such extraordinarily friendly people when they had to cooperate in its conquest? Friendly they were, not only when they dealt with a foreigner, but apparently also among themselves. Never had I seen anything like it in Germany - where ugly scenes would sometimes develop in public for no convincing reasons. Why did the Germans begin so many sentences with an emphasized I or Ich? Nobody did that kind of thing in America. And weren't the Americans cheerful! I hardly ever saw sad faces -- in 1925. Really, these were happy people. To be sure, one reason for this fortunate state of affairs was perhaps that absence of serious problems which I mentioned a moment ago. During interviews, I would be asked, for instance, whether women should be allowed to smoke in restaurants (remember: this was 1925), whether President Wilson had had a truly American face, and whether the Germans ever ate potatoes. When I raised what seemed to me to be more important questions about America, and also about its relations to other countries, I soon began to feel that I was perhaps out of order. Most of my new friends believed in an omnipotent entity called 'Progress', which would soon take care of everything. Why should they worry? But, Progress was not only around, it was also present and active in everybody I met. At the time, the people in Massachusetts led what seemed to me practically Spartan lives, and they had little time for daydreaming, an activity which was generally despised. One professor told me that taking a nap after lunch appeared to him almost a commerce with crime. I laughed, and answered that, in Europe, it would almost be a crime if, as a form of relaxation, people were to put their feet on the next piece of furniture, as my students often did while I lectured. Now, he laughed, and said that we seemed to give too much attention to unnatural formalities.

In smaller towns, I sometimes found symptoms which I did not entirely like. The vocabulary which people in such places used when referring to mental facts was small; and, when I compared statements of different persons, their expressions were a bit monotonous. Behaviorism is generally regarded as a psychological school which was established in the States for purely scientific reasons. This did not seem to be entirely true. Perhaps behaviourism was such a success in America because, in this young country, overt action was

quite naturally more important than philosophical and psychological speculation, of introspection. At any rate, a young professor of psychology once told his class in my presence: "The meaning or the sense of human life? I can't see that thinking about such matters ever changes the performances of people. It is these performances that count, and that must therefore be studied by the psychologist - which we will now do."

Whether or not this explanation of behaviorism was correct, I soon learned to be fairly cautious, not only when trying to explain American mores, but also when tempted to generalize. Were the Americans so friendly only because they had just conquered their country, and could still enjoy the unique practical opportunities which it now offered? - Only four years later, I was again in the States, and saw what happened when, in the enormous catastrophe of Wall Street, some of my friends lost practically everything they owned. They remained just as friendly under these circumstances as they had been before.

Some facts I failed to understand. The term "success" played a far greater role than it played in Europe. And what did it mean that so many obviously friendly people regarded a strong sense of competition among individuals as an excellent rather than as an inferior motivation? Moreover, why was business regarded as so important that it could ruin landscapes by erecting ugly advertising posters along all the bigger highways? To repeat, this was 1925, when too many seemed to believe that what was good for their selling was always also good for the country. But almost every time I made observations of this kind, and began to feel: this is America, I promptly discovered that such general statements were mistaken. I had only to take a train to Cambridge, and to meet friends of mine at Harvard, in order to discover that these men were no less disturbed by certain developments than I was. It would also have been ridiculous to accuse these great scientists of being friendly conformists with a narrow mental horizon. Surely, they too, were friendly; but, as individuals, they were just as interesting as the best men I had ever met in other countries. And, incidentally, while at the time many Americans knew little about the more aesthetic, of the strictly intellectual, aspects of human living, those Harvard professors and similar people elsewhere accepted the European's interest in such matters as perfectly natural, because they had the same interests.

At times, they would mildly correct my enthusiastic descriptions of the American scene. Once I asked while it was true that, in America, even the working people had cars, in which they drove to their factories, and then home again. I was sure that nothing of the kind was happened in Germany. My friends remained silent for a moment, and then one of them said with a curious serious expression in his eyes: "It is quite true; but, then, in America even professors have cars."

Once more - this was 1925. Now, in the 35 years which have since elapsed, could Americans much as it has actually done? Take only what I said about the lack of interest in the arts which I found deplorable in 1925. Now, there is no better music everywhere than we have in the States. As to the interest in cognition matters, the revolution has been equally astonishing. And, if intellectual development may sometimes appear a bit one-sided, there will always be a professor at Columbia University ready to tell us when we make mistakes.

Only one change has occurred during this period which seems to me deplorable. The delightful optimism of 1925 is gradually vanishing. Too many problems have <caught> up with the Americans, of which they could hardly be aware 35 years ago. I sometimes do see sad faces in 1960.

But, today, I do not <ful> like thinking of such matters. I wish therefore return to 1925 - and tell you my story, the story of how I once almost became famous, by mistake -- in 1925. When I said that, at the time, Americans seemed to have little to worry about, I was not altogether right. For there was one concept which disturbed a great many people. This was the concept of evolution. 1925 was the year of the famous monkey trial, a trial concerned with a law forbidding any reference to evolution in the schools of a certain southern state. Now, when I was in Africa, I had studied the problem-solving behavior of chimpanzees, and had written a book about my observations. The book had been translated, and was widely read in America. Consequently, I had to give many lectures on this subject. There was never any trouble when I gave such lectures in the Northeast, the Middle West, and the West. But I could not talk about the apes in any of the southern states. Without my knowing about it, the chairman of the department where I was teaching once wrote to one of the best southern universities, and asked whether they would not invite me to talk about the chimpanzees. The answer was that, to their regret, they could not invite me; because the mere announcement of a lecture about intelligent behavior in those apes would arouse a terrific storm of indignation all over their state.

Soon afterwards, I went to Berkeley in California, where I was scheduled to teach in summer school. One of my courses was on Comparative or Animal Psychology; and, in the atmosphere of the time, my students listened with great attention. It happened that, one day, I talked not about chimpanzees but about crickets. My purpose was to show that, in animal psychology, negativistic statements may be just as wrong as the enthusiastic reports which often come from laymen who love their dogs or other pets too much. Negativistic statements about the abilities of animals had just become fashionable among the biologists in Europe. It had, for instance, become an axiom that many insects have no sense of hearing. When the

experts were told that this could not be true, because crickets obviously chirped in alternation - a female answering a male, then the male calling back, and so forth, - the experts would say that mere tactual awareness of crude vibrations propagated in the ground from one cricket to the other would suffice as an explanation. Besides, if one cricket found the other as a matter of sexual behavior, could not the sense of smell make this possible? - But, there was a certain highschool teacher in the city of Vienna, a Mr. Regen, who read about these things in scientific journals, and was not impressed by the experts' arguments. He therefore decided to make some crucial tests; and he did them with so much elegance and such a light touch that I was sometimes tempted to call him the Mozart among the experimental zoologists. Take his first experiment which referred to the thesis that crickets, far from hearing each other, merely feel the crude waves which the chirping of one causes in the ground, and so also at the place of the other cricket. Mr. Regen constructed two little balloons which he filled with a gas lighter than air, and attached to both tiny gondolas, into one of which he put a male cricket, while a female became passenger in the other. The balloons were released at a considerable distance from each other, in a wide and very high hall, where they soon remained suspended in the air. What happened? When, after a while, one began to chirp, the other answered, and so forth -- although now there were no such crude waves as they were supposed to feel. In a second experiment, equally simple and beautiful, Mr. Regen attacked both the thesis of the crude waves which the crickets allegedly feel and the statement that it is merely the sense of smell which make them to establish interesting personal relations. He took a male cricket into a house at one end of Vienna, and a female into one at the other end of the city. Between the two creatures, there were now the thousand smells and the thousand heavy reverberations of city life. But the two houses were connected by phone. A while after the connection had been made, one of the crickets began to chirp. When he had stopped, another chirping, that of the other cricket, came from the phone in his room, and the cricket promptly moved toward the phone. Wherever the phone was placed, the cricket always moved toward it when the chirping was heard by the observer and by the cricket -- and the same happened, of course, at the other end of the line when he chirped. (Eventually, the whole issue was, settled when it was discovered that crickets have ears, and where they wear them, namely, in a location utterly different from that of human ears. After destruction of these organs, crickets no longer chirped in alternation. -

Now, while this appears to me to be a nice episode in comparative psychology, it is not yet a story which concerns the present speaker. My personal participation began when my students had heard the report on Mr. Regen's experiments. For, two days later, one of them came to class with the day's issue of a San Francisco newspaper. The student had talked to one of this papers reporters - and the result was an article with this headline: **German**

Scientist Observes Ants Flirting by Phone. The experiments had become my experiments, and the crickets had become ants. You can imagine the more specific content of the article.

Well, the students laughed, and so did I. After a number of weeks, I had almost forgotten the incident; but I had occasion to remember it when I returned to New England. I had just stepped down from my train to the platform, when a group of intense young men approached me -- all reporters of newspapers. They had heard about the story in the San Francisco paper, had accepted it literally, and now wanted to be told more juicy details from the man whom they regarded as the author. I patiently explained that I had not done those experiments, that the animals had actually been crickets, and that, after all, these were serious scientific matters not to be exploited for the purpose of a cheap sensation. The men, quite disappointed, left, and I never thought about Mr. Regen and his crickets again until I returned to Europe early in 1926. I had a week or so, before I had to be in Berlin. This week I decided to spend in Paris. One evening I was having dinner in a restaurant on the left side of the river, when a boy came in, who was selling copies of the Paris edition of a New York paper. Fine, I told myself, let us see what they are now doing in the United States - and so I bought a copy. I had hardly opened it when I saw a big headline on the first page: "**Noted Psychologist Studies Intimate Love Life of Ants**". Even this was not yet the end of it. When I first came to my office in Berlin, I found lots of mail accumulated on my desk. I looked through it, and soon discovered one of those very small letters which mostly come to you from England. I opened it, it was handwritten, and began as follows: "Dear Sir - we have just become acquainted with your epochmaking discoveries concerning the sexual life of the insects. Any further information you would be kind enough to send us will be welcomed with real enthusiasm."

This was the first and the last time I could feel that I was a very important person, for no good reason at all. But who knows? In the meantime, the story may have managed to enter Russia, and there my have caused doubts about the seriousness of Western Science.