

The Empire of the Dead and the Empire of the Living: John Fiske and the Spatialization of Tradition

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With a wary condescension to Yankee bumptiousness, the British historian William Stubbs once suggested that a codification of manorial customs might serve to demonstrate

the continuity of English local institutions from the earliest times, to last until our American cousins have annexed us; and possibly longer still, for those cousins, even more than most of our own countrymen, show a very lively interest in everything, legal, customary, or historical, that illustrates the cradle of the race, out of which evolution is going to produce the ideal man.¹

This melange of imperial hubris, scientifically gilded idealism, and retrospective curiosity is as familiar among Stubbs's late nineteenth-century American contemporaries as the irony with which the Englishman treated it. It was served up most systematically and appealingly, perhaps, by the New England philosopher and historian John Fiske (1842-1901). But Fiske offered more than an odd conjunction of high-minded and self-serving ideas.

Fiske was a "popularizer," as his leading biographer describes him, who drew on more original thinkers to fashion an account of history as evolutionary progress. Standard treatments have emphasized the conservative outcome of this project: beginning as a rebel against religious orthodoxy, Fiske ended by constructing a defense of orthodox values based on Spencerian and Darwinian precepts.² But I propose to show that Fiske can also be considered the other way

around, as a traditionalist who vitiated tradition. Identifying an anciently-rooted “Teutonic Idea” of political development with unlimited Anglo American expansion, he universalized that which took its life from particularities of place and time, and discounted those other traditions for which this expansion left no room. Fiske consequently shows the traditionalist impulse in late nineteenth-century America to have been in no simple way reactionary, but as capable rather of an aggressive, characteristically modern, and ultimately self-defeating rendering of time as space.

A native of Connecticut, Fiske graduated from Harvard in 1863. He lectured briefly at his Alma Mater and served as assistant librarian at the Harvard College Library for seven years, but failed to win a permanent faculty position. Religious heterodoxy initially damaged his prospects. While an undergraduate, he had abandoned his family’s Calvinism—denouncing the Geneva Reformer himself as “a sort of incarnation of the Devil he talks about”—and had drawn unfavorable notice as a rebel. Without the scholarly discipline which academic affiliation could have provided, his thought developed little beyond his youth. Proclaiming himself a positivist during his college years, he later abandoned that label and settled comfortably into Herbert Spencer’s “synthetic,” evolutionary philosophy. Adapting Spencer to American religious sensibilities, he espoused a “Cosmic Theism” which purged Christian doctrines of gross anthropomorphism but recognized their essence in the keeping of a deity who was immanent in nature and human consciousness, and who worked through evolution to elevate the human race from brutality to an eventual reign of peace and altruism.³

Fiske was a stout, hearty Gilded Age American, uxorious and companionable, capable of keen intellectual disputation but confident of the progressive resolution of differences and revelation of truth. His personal expansiveness fitted well with the Victorian appetite for grand systematizing, which he most ambitiously indulged in his *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy* (1874). Impelled by financial need into a career as a public lecturer, he eventually rendered many of his largely historical topics in book form. Works like *The Discovery of America*, *The Beginnings of New England*, and *The Critical Period of American History*, effectively combined vivid narrative with a clear and edifying interpretive scheme, and made Fiske “the best-selling historian of his generation.”⁴

The reputation as a great man which Fiske enjoyed at his death—on July 4, 1901—began quickly to erode. The shrinking of Herbert Spencer’s stature from its Victorian dimensions inevitably contributed to the diminution of that of his disciple. Later historians faulted his research methods as insufficiently grounded in original sources, and his philosophy, despite its “cosmic” reach, seemed increasingly provincial—that of an “ethnic historian” who celebrated the English heritage in New England and its achievements in the building of the nation, as Milton Berman put it in 1961.⁵ Most fundamentally, perhaps, his vision of progressive social evolution became a casualty of modernist sensibility and twentieth-century disillusionment. Yet in his articulation of the themes to which



John Fiske.

Figure 1: Portrait of John Fiske from *The Life and Letters of John Fiske* by John Spencer Clark, 1917.

Bishop Stubbs called sardonic attention, and particularly in his dexterity in rendering the traditional virtues of home and community as a summons to national expansion, Fiske illuminates a phase of American thought in which a retrospective mood ran in tandem with imperial aspirations.

During Fiske's lifetime, Bronson Alcott's dictum that Americans possessed "the best of time and space" seemed true in as much a dynamic as a static sense.⁶ Yet while space was identifiable readily enough with the country's accustomed expansionism, time was more problematical. Since the eighteenth century, for Americans, it had above all meant progress, and progress meant, purportedly, the rejection of the past as a guide for the future. American society like all others perpetuated traditions and customs of many kinds, but actual connectedness with prior generations was not entirely the point, as James Russell Lowell astutely pointed out. "The past has not laid its venerable hands upon us in consecration," it seemed to Lowell, "conveying to us that mysterious influence whose force is in its continuity."⁷ The immense space of a "new" continent seemed to cancel any debt to time. The most potent traditions of the country, accordingly, conspired precisely to denigrate the value of tradition. It counted for nothing in effecting the salvation of the Puritan Elect; it fell away before the Jeffersonian sovereignty of the present generation; it seemed a hindrance to Franklin's middle-class utilitarianism; it was a shoddy vanity to Transcendentalists. "Why should we import rags and relics into the new hour?" Emerson asked. "Nature abhors the old. . . ."⁸

Yet innocence of tradition was an aberration, if not of Emerson's "Nature," certainly of culture. Even before the Civil War there was a "Party of Memory" as well as a "Party of Hope," as R.W.B. Lewis put it; during the half century following the war memory—and tradition—came to exercise a far more pervasive attraction.⁹ In the face of actual technological and social change which argued a radical discontinuity with the past, a variety of developments reflected a yearning for the consolations of tradition: a vogue for genealogy and hereditary organizations, a new and more scholarly phase of neo-Gothic architecture, a colonial revival, the importation of the British arts and crafts movement, the growing popularity of historical novels and pageants, and the emergence of historic preservation.¹⁰ An expansive spirit shifted readily between space and time. Once "eschewed by common consent as the dullest of topics," an *Atlantic Monthly* reviewer noted in 1890, the national history was now being pursued by Americans "with the same wholesale ardor with which they have extirpated Indians, felled forests, built railroads, crushed rebellion, and populated a continent."¹¹

While cheering the progress of their own discipline, historians have emphasized the reactive nature of the traditionalist movements of the time: they offered, in this view, a sense of stability in the midst of unsettling change, time-hallowed certainty in the face of religious or metaphysical doubt, and the reassurance of status for those who felt socially besieged by un-WASPish immigrants and

upstart millionaires. Some recent work has shown that tradition was not necessarily the last refuge of a “dispossessed elite”; it could be a weapon of well-entrenched social groups in struggles over values and power. Defense of tradition could also fall under the description of the “antimodernism” discussed by T.J. Jackson Lears as an effort, in common with modernism, to recover authentic experience from the desolating rationalization and “overcivilization” of bourgeois society.¹² Neither reactionary nor embattled patrician nor antimodernist, Fiske suggests another way in which tradition was employed: not in response to perceived deficiencies or uncertainties in society, but as a positive rationale for society’s continued expansion—as the oracle of empire.

This use of tradition was, in large measure, considered and deliberate. Following tradition was more than ever a self-conscious pursuit in the late nineteenth century—a tendency attested to in different ways by the frequent “invention of tradition” for political and social purposes, and by the treatment of the subject in the developing social sciences.¹³ Industrialization and urbanization fostered a clearer awareness of tradition by casting the differences between “traditional” and “modern” ways of life in high relief; imperial encounters with non-western peoples made the juxtaposition still more dramatic. Dichotomies such as Sir Henry Maine’s distinction between status and contract societies and Ferdinand Tönnies’ antinomy of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* expressed the resulting sense of disjunction. Yet there were countercurrents. Evolution, applied to society, suggested the continuity of social usages; while anthropologists studied the hegemony of tradition in primitive society, sociologists pondered its continuing sway even among the most “civilized.” Culture, which had once connoted the lofty attainments of arts and sciences, of thought and sensibility, which liberated humanity from the burden of tradition, was coming to be “identified with that very burden,” as George Stocking put it.¹⁴

Fiske’s views were sufficiently *au courant* to be shaped by these trends of social thought, although he perceived in them no challenge to the hierarchical ranking of societies which retained the mantle of orthodoxy during his lifetime. Herbert Spencer and other sociologists and historians showed him how tradition could be fitted neatly into an overarching plan of progress. In the early stages of society, it seemed clear, human beings were necessarily broken to the “yoke of tyrannical custom,” as Fiske put it; there was no other way to organize men and women effectively to cope with their environment.¹⁵ Although tyrannical, this early rule of custom and tradition made possible a truly human life, one distinguished by enduring social relationships which nurtured the growth of moral sentiments from generation to generation. In keeping with Spencer’s law of evolution, moreover, accumulating customs and traditions made the social environment increasingly heterogeneous, and this heterogeneity, Fiske thought, was “the chief proximate determining cause of social progress.”¹⁶ For precisely this reason the prehistoric invention of tradition had been a decisive event in human development. Citing the French philosopher Emile Littré, he pointed out that the study of humanity revealed

a new phenomenon unknown in biology or in psychology pure and simple. That new phenomenon is Tradition, or the bequeathing of all its organized intellectual and moral experience by each generation to its successor. Here for the first time we have an environment which is rapidly changing in a definite order of sequence, and changing by the very activity of the community itself.¹⁷

Although tradition transcended biology, as Fiske pointed out, it is noteworthy that the one insight which he claimed as his own original contribution to the theory of evolution gave tradition a biological basis. This was Fiske's theory of the prolongation of infancy in human beings—a contribution not accorded much importance by later investigators, but one which Fiske (on Spencer's assurance) regarded as his guarantee of immortality. A long childhood, combined with the development of language, increasingly permitted education to supersede mere heredity as the means of passing on ancestral experience, Fiske argued. Humanity was thus enabled “to accumulate a fund of tradition, which in the fullness of time was to bloom forth in history and poetry, in science and theology.”¹⁸

Fiske so closely identified tradition with progress as seemingly to reduce them to facets of the same grand process of social evolution. He could praise Francis Parkman for his unequalled skill in depicting American Indian society in “the ancient stages of its progress,” and as readily note that when barbarism was overwhelmed by civilization “its vanishing is final: the thread of tradition is cut off forever with the shears of Fate.”¹⁹ Although he could contemplate the severing of barbarian tradition with fair equanimity, Fiske was a gradualist when it came to changes in civilized society, and he adapted Walter Bagehot's famous metaphor to bind tradition and progress in a different way: “in a progressive society the cementing and breaking of the ‘cake of custom’ must go on simultaneously,” he suggested.²⁰

Yet the breaking, it appeared, never quite kept pace with the cementing. The effects of the traditionary were cumulative, and to make the point Fiske availed himself of another image from the stock ideas of the century, at once more imperial and more somber, and as darkly ironic in its implications for expansion as in those for progress. “As Comte expresses it, in one of his profoundest aphorisms, the empire of the dead over the living increases from age to age,” Fiske noted in the *Cosmic Philosophy*. In the earliest phases of human experience, as he explicated Comte, conditions of physical environment were largely determining; with the advance of civilization “the organized experience of past generations” was of ever-increasing importance. Consequently, Fiske concluded, “the environment of each generation consists to a greater and greater extent of the sum total of traditions bequeathed by all past generations.”²¹

Americans, Fiske included, were in actuality more interested in creating an empire of the living than in living in an empire of the dead. Yet the one could

authorize the other. Comte's figure suggested a phenomenon noted in Fiske's time, as in ours, as a propensity of western thought. "In place of a heterogeneous duration whose moments permeate one another," Henri Bergson argued in 1889, the need to objectify and measure had elicited "a homogeneous time whose moments are strung on a spatial line." Richard J. Quinones has recently drawn on Bergson to explain the character of numbing uniformity which historical schemes of progress and evolution assumed for twentieth-century modernists: "when the predictive, controlling aspect of time triumphed in the late nineteenth century, and triumphed so thoroughly and one-sidedly, it paradoxically produced its opposite effect, the triumph of space. Predictive time, without innovation or simple freshness of human appeal, leads to a kind of repetitive sameness . . ."²²

In nineteenth-century America, space and time could be antitheses, especially when time was considered retrospectively. "The thinking American," Stephen Spender observed, "was divided between history—his roots within the English and European tradition—and geography—the immensity of America and the sense of his own being expanding to embrace that immensity." Space to expand could compensate for paucity of tradition.²³ Yet the "homogeneous," measured time of which Bergson wrote would have meant to Americans the more-or-less smooth course of progress which was an article of national faith. This kind of time positively summoned Americans to expansion. Insofar as Americans perceived their continent as "empty"—leaving its aboriginal inhabitants out of account—the space to be traversed and consumed was from a human standpoint equally homogeneous. The frontier line could advance with as much temporal and spatial evenness as inevitable natural and historical contingencies would permit. With this formulation the purely progressive side of Fiske's scheme of history was well in accord.

This mode of spatialization, however, seemed to have little to do with tradition, the affinities of which have long been recognized as being with place rather than space—with the definite rather than the abstract. As Sir Walter Scott put it, "tradition depends upon locality." This was a problem for American traditionalists. George Perkins Marsh early encapsulated the withering effect upon tradition of the mobility so central to the national experience: "antiquity, and the reverence with which it is regarded, necessarily partake of a local character, and an emigrating people leaves behind it, with the localities, the associations and the traditions upon which that reverence is founded," he observed in 1843.²⁴ And when locality yields to a space which is everywhere and nowhere, it will not be surprising if the lumpy specificity of tradition resolves itself accordingly into a smooth and abstract time. The future is readily perceived as progress, but the past either becomes alien—a "foreign country"—or is subsumed by the timeless—consequences familiar enough among ahistorical Americans.

Fiske, despite the "cosmic" abstractions of his evolutionary philosophy, was unwilling to jettison the traditions of place and home, and his real project was to find a way in which they might be generalized. With him as with many Victorians

domesticity comported easily with empire—and even with cosmos. He was a man for whom it was axiomatic that an acceptable afterlife was unimaginable “without the continuance of the tender household affections which alone make the present life worth living. . . .” In *The Idea of God as Affected by Modern Knowledge* (1885), he more graphically linked home with eternity: “as in the roaring loom of Time the endless web of events is woven, each strand shall make more and more clearly visible the living garment of God.”²⁵ Associated traditionally with hearthside labor and cottage industry, the loom became the emblem here of a universal design. Processing yarn or thread into an expanse of cloth with the forward motion imparted by the machine, it represented as components of that design both linear progress and the translation of time into space as suggested by Bergson.

An expansive view of domestic and community usages, if not the grand teleology to which Fiske gave expression, is familiar among historians of the time. William B. Weeden perhaps best articulated the theme in his *Economic and Social History of New England, 1620-1789* (1890), when he remarked upon the Anglo American “power of carrying the home outward.” By the time of the Civil War this social and political vitality had enabled the American people, “having burst the swaddling clothes of local government,” to grow “into imperial government,” Weeden elaborated. Lois Kimball Mathews’ *The Expansion of New England* (1909), although published after Fiske’s death, provides a good example of the further development of the theme in its tracing of the march of Yankee institutions—church, school and town-meeting—from the Atlantic to the Pacific. “Wherever Puritan blood has gone, Puritan traditions have been carried,” was Mathews’ succinct conclusion.²⁶

Such formulations would no doubt have added to Bishop Stubbs’s amusement at the American facility in combining the themes of local tradition with those of evolutionary progress and expansion, but it was largely Stubbs himself and other of the later British “Whig” historians who supplied the rationale. “Ideas of progress and the Burkean conception of tradition” were the “warp and woof” of Whig history, as J.W. Burrow put it.²⁷ The Whigs were concerned particularly to trace modern national polities to their ancient and local roots. Fiske was among the historians instructed by Sir Henry Maine’s *Village-Communities in the East and West* (1889). Although customary and traditional to an oppressive degree, the primitive “mark community” (the village with its common land) harbored also a democratic impulse, Maine thought. In the village council in particular, as he elsewhere explained, lay the “embryo” of Parliament and other Anglo American legislative bodies.²⁸

Other scholars were more sanguine about the early uses of tradition than the individualistic Maine. Among these Fiske found Edward A. Freeman particularly congenial—both as an historian and as a “very lovable” friend. Like Fiske, Freeman believed firmly in the congruence of progress with custom and tradition. “Let ancient customs prevail; let us ever stand fast in the old paths,” he urged. “But the old paths have in England ever been the paths of progress” The

Englishman's insistence on the long continuity of Anglo American history—he regarded the United States as a third England, after the original Anglo-Saxon home on the European mainland and “Middle England” in Britain—gratified both Fiske's Anglophilia and his faith in social evolution. Freeman's conviction that national history was made up largely of local history, and his interest in federalism as the means of expanding the sphere of the political community, also suited Fiske's purposes.²⁹ Above all, perhaps, Freeman offered a British validation of both American tradition and American expansion.

Pursuing these master themes, Fiske depicted America as a modified but greater England, the product of an unfolding progressive transatlantic tradition. Notions of the country as a new beginning were wholly set aside; those traditions most deeply rooted in English history usually turned out to be the ones which had best served the cause of liberty, and which had therefore best flourished in America. Preeminent were those associated with that much idealized community, the New England town, and with its equally idealized town-meeting. Fiske took rare and mild exception to Freeman in insisting that the Swiss cantonal assemblies, which had enraptured the English historian as pure survivals of Germanic democracy, were no more venerable or egalitarian than their New England counterparts—even if they were held in the open air and attended by a pageantry eschewed by austere Yankees.³⁰

The town community—venerable with tradition, pregnant with empire—was for Fiske the “home” which was to be “carried outward.” He described Cambridge, Massachusetts as the product of “a rich inheritance” encompassing not only traces of the primordial “mark community” but classical and medieval traditions of law and scholarship associated with the town's English namesake. An address in 1900 commemorating the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Middletown, Connecticut, in which he had grown up, occasioned a more sentimental encomium upon the “sweet domesticity of the old New England,” as well as a reminder of the seminal role of the town-meeting in creating the American democracy.³¹ Although such sentiments reflected the Yankee tendency to see America as New England writ large, Fiske insisted that “something very like the ‘town-meeting principle’ lies at the bottom of all the political life of the United States.” He found analogies to the town-meeting in the courts of early Maryland manors and the elected vestries of South Carolina parishes. Virginia institutions were more difficult to assimilate to the town principle, but Fiske could at least enlist Thomas Jefferson in testimony that “the town meeting is the best form of government ever devised by man.”³²

No matter how impressive the institutions of local self-government, Fiske believed that the ultimate problem of political history had been to find a way of combining them with the greater security and concert of efforts made possible by large-scale organization. The solution, upon which he elaborated in *The Beginnings of New England* (1889), had been found in the “Teutonic Idea of political life” which it had been preeminently the work of New Englanders to bear to

America and nurture on the new continent.³³ Despite its racial overtones, the Teutonic Idea was essentially a political tradition, inhering not only in ideas, but in beliefs, values, laws, customs and institutions which the historian ascribed to the Germanic and especially the English peoples. It was for Fiske the paramount tradition of western political development because it provided the nexus between tradition and expansion, between community and empire.

The Teutonic Idea represented the highest phase of statecraft. In Fiske's analysis, the "Oriental" method of nation-building had been one of "conquest without incorporation." The Roman method had provided for incorporation, but not for representation. It had been the Teutonic genius to follow expansion with both incorporation and representation, making it possible to achieve "national unity on a grand scale, without weakening the sense of personal and local independence." Although the struggle between centralizing and localizing forces had been a general one in Europe, it was only in England, Fiske thought, that the representative principle had been fully established, and it was there that local independence had been most effectively preserved. But the problem was a continuing one. "From the days of Arminius and Civilis in the wilds of lower Germany to the days of Franklin and Jefferson in Independence Hall, we have been engaged in this struggle," he observed.³⁴

The continuity of the struggle was unbroken; Fiske explained the apparent American discontinuities of emigration and revolution by making such breaks with the past themselves traditional—the habits of a wandering and freedom-loving race—and further through his perception that the circumstances of emigration had resulted in a distillation and strengthening of salient national traits. The ancient "Aryan" invaders of Europe had been "the pioneers or Yankees of prehistoric antiquity," he suggested, in whom changing circumstances had fostered resourcefulness and flexibility. The later Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain and the still later British migration to America had accentuated these qualities. The Atlantic Ocean served as a wider English channel, a shield against foreign despotism which obviated the need for a domestic one. Consequently, English traditions of liberty had taken ready root, and were given new scope by the vast reaches of the continent.³⁵

A favorable environment had enabled Americans to perfect a principle which was embryonic in English and Germanic modes of political organization, and thereby to supply the capstone of the "Teutonic Idea." This was the federal principle of government. Federalism was for Fiske no mere expedient; its significance transcended any mechanical division of powers between states and a general government. It served almost as a political philosophers' stone in its mediation between the local and traditional on the one hand and the extended and modern on the other, in its efficacy in transmuting time into space.

Federalism in this sense was a natural product of social evolution, of the progressive "integration of communities, originally mere tribes or clans, into social aggregates of higher and higher orders of complexity."³⁶ Conflating

federalism in the usual sense with representation in county courts and Parliament, Fiske described the historical evolution of the English state as a sort of cellular construction of small units into large. Thus village-communities made up the shire, and the kingdom was composed of a union of shires. Full germination of the federal principle required, however, abundance of space as well as of time: “*first*, a vast extent of unoccupied country which could be settled without much warfare by men of the same race and speech, and *secondly*, on the part of the settlers, a rich inheritance of political training such as is afforded by long ages of self-government.” These, of course, were precisely the advantages which Americans enjoyed. Fiske pointed with particular pride to the pivotal role of his native state. Connecticut’s colonial system of electing its governor and council by a majority of the voters, while towns were represented equally in one house of the legislature, had created a kind of “tiny federal republic,” he argued. It had also provided a broad precedent for the “Connecticut Compromise” at the Constitutional Convention of 1787—an accommodation enabling the United States to combine “imperial vastness with unhampered local self-government.”³⁷

Fiske was confident that the political genius which had inspired the Connecticut Compromise was not yet exhausted. Vindicated and strengthened by the Union triumph in the Civil War, the federal principle seemed poised to give the Teutonic Idea “a hundred fold power and seminal influence in the future work of the world.” A federated Europe, and even an eventual world federal union, appeared as reasonable prospects in this great unfolding. Globalized, the traditions of the English village and the New England town would construct a peaceful, “truly Christian,” world.³⁸

This vision, of course, was only provincialism universalized. Fiske had noted the advantages of flexibility which an American federal union offered in bringing into comity states so diverse as Maine, Louisiana, and California.³⁹ Yet the accent was on commonality, of race and of political tradition. That accent became even more pronounced when Fiske sought to project the federal principle beyond national bounds. He proposed his world federation in a lecture appropriately entitled “Manifest Destiny,” delivered at Boston in 1879 and published unchanged six years later. He left no doubt as to the cultural and even the biological provenance of such a federation. The contemporary vigor of the English-speaking peoples seemed to him ample indication that

the work which the English race began when it colonized North America is destined to go on until every land on the earth’s surface that is not already the seat of an old civilization shall become English in its language, in its political habits and traditions, and to a predominant extent in the blood of its people. The day is at hand when four-fifths of the human race will trace its pedigree to English forefathers, as four-fifths of the white people in the United States trace their pedigree today.⁴⁰

Clearly the federation which was to preside over a future so envisioned would represent the triumph of one very particular tradition. Absent here are other traditions except for the implied concession that a non-English "old civilization" might be permitted its residual existence. The ideal world union seems hardly to conceal a heady mixture of imperialism and racism. Actually these terms cannot be applied to Fiske without serious qualification. Although entirely aware of the role of force in the growth of the British Empire and the American republic, he attributed the success of those polities fundamentally to superior Anglo American political traditions and organizing principles, and assumed that the future enlargement of their sway would be benevolent and pacific. He was consequently dismayed by the war with Spain in 1898, although he was persuaded to endorse the annexation of the Philippines after initial opposition. Contrary to hard-core nativists, he believed American society capable of assimilating any particular race. The latter term was problematic; for Fiske as for many of his contemporaries, "race" hovered uncertainly in meaning between biological and cultural categories. He accepted easily enough the conventions of the time which used such terms as "Teutonic" and "Aryan" to denote "dominant races" and to explain historical development (although he preferred "English" to the ubiquitous "Anglo-Saxon"). Yet he knew that there were no "pure races" on any large scale, and no necessary correlation of race with social advancement. He warned as early as 1876 of "the fallaciousness of explaining all national peculiarities by a cheap reference to 'blood'"⁴¹

Fiske falls short of later standards of tolerance and pluralism less because he was touched by racism and jingoism than because he subordinated considerations of culture, tradition, and race alike to a unitary scheme of progressive social evolution. Relying on anthropologists like Louis Henry Morgan, Fiske accepted the view that human culture advanced toward higher levels of civilization by passing through universal stages of development. Consequently, one might observe among the Iroquois customs and beliefs characteristic of the early Greeks, for example; Fiske noted with remarkable exactitude that the inhabitants of the Aegean region by ca. 6000 B.C.E. had reached a stage of development which it had taken the North American Indians until ca. 1700 C.E. to attain.⁴²

The theory of universal stages of development did not logically entail racism in any strict biological sense, and might even imply a racial equality: a people detained in its ascension of the great developmental ladder by adventitious factors or adverse environmental circumstances might in the normal course of social evolution expect to make its way up. Fiske gave point to his comparison of the Iroquois with prehistoric Europeans by arguing that Indians were eminently capable of "learning civilization."⁴³ But the linear scale of development accentuated perceived inequalities of culture, and submerged the integrity of particular traditions in a preconceived plan of progress. It would be difficult to rescue Fiske from Edward Said's strictures upon the "Eurocentric culture" which "relentlessly codified and observed everything about the non-European or peripheral world," with the limits of understanding which such a project entailed.⁴⁴

On the American continents, where the Teutonic Idea entered upon its culminating phase of social expansion, surviving Indians might “learn civilization” and in this way accelerate their social progress, but native traditions which the prescribed course of ascent could not accommodate were readily severed by the “shears of Fate.” Fiske did not contemplate this development with any lack of interest, or even of sympathy. In what was probably his most impressive and successful work of history, *The Discovery of America* (1892), he devoted considerable attention to the Native American cultures. His interests derived in the first instance from the assumption that these societies could throw light on those of the West at an equivalent stage of development, but he was clearly impressed by the brilliant arts and urban amenities of the Aztecs and the attainments in social and political organization of the Incas. He acknowledged that the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru had had no more of right or morality about it than the springing of the “lion . . . upon his prey,” and he decried—with a certain Anglo American righteousness—the heinousness of Spanish methods of empire-building.⁴⁵

Yet in their encounter with indigenous American cultures the Spanish had after all represented civilization, whereas according to Morgan’s classification even the Aztecs and Incas had never risen above the middle level of barbarism. When “two grades of culture so widely severed” came into contact, the destruction of the lesser was to be expected, and Fiske could not feel that this was truly to be regretted. Even the Spanish Inquisition was preferable to the human sacrifices of the Aztecs, and the Spanish use of torture more palatable than the Native American. At least the Inquisition tortured with a moral purpose in view; this seemed to Fiske—innocent of the dedicated cruelties of the twentieth century—somewhat less repugnant than “wanton” Indian atrocities.⁴⁶

However the moral scales were to be balanced between conquerors and conquered, the extirpation of peoples and traditions which Fiske described suggests to the present-day reader a different and grimmer meaning for the phrase “empire of the dead” than that which Auguste Comte intended. Within the new empires of the living—Spanish or English—there was little chance of the coexistence of largely incommensurate traditions—as incommensurate, perhaps, in their cruelties as in their virtues. Not even the federal principle, efficacious among Connecticut towns or the states of the Union, could guarantee comity among such differing cultures.

A strictly linear scheme of social development, especially when it issued in the spatialized form of imperial expansion, almost precluded such comity. It also distorted the nature of tradition, as it had previously been understood. For earlier defenders of tradition such as Edmund Burke, the traditional had had a particularistic and motley quality; for them, indeed, its very value to the accumulation of human experience arose from its lack of assimilability to any abstract or universalizing principle. Burke’s celebrated “little platoons” of men could encompass the domestic and community felicities which Fiske defended, but

hardly such a hypertrophy of tradition as the “Teutonic Idea” with which he tried to give these felicities universal scope.

By the time of Fiske’s death, tradition subsumed in a scheme of progressive evolution was coming to seem as constraining in its way as tradition understood as a purely static phenomenon had seemed to the American “Party of Hope.” Franz Boas and other anthropologists abandoned the theory of universal stages of development even as they affirmed the necessary functional role of tradition. Modernists resolved to break up the sheer continuity of nineteenth-century time to permit the timeless to impinge upon everyday experience; they rejected as well the spatial expression of that continuity. “Was not Modernism . . . an attempt to put a brake on the linear movement of the will toward simple expansion?” Quinones asks.⁴⁷

Since Fiske’s time exponents of tradition have been inclined to view it as a defense precisely against the tyranny of the narrowly progressive, the universalizing, and the mindlessly expansive—against “empire” of either the living or the dead. During the first half of the twentieth century it retreated from its imperial dimensions into such spatial embodiments as Josiah Royce’s “province,” Ralph Adams Cram’s “walled town,” and the yeoman’s farm of the Southern Agrarians. Like such more tangible reservations of memory as Colonial Williamsburg and Old Sturbridge Village, these formulations attempted to restore to tradition its proper specificity of place.

The ascription to tradition of an imperial destiny was simply a corollary of overreaching moral and epistemic claims. Like Burke, some recent thinkers have found rather that the value of tradition is intimately connected to its limitations. Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, contrasts tradition as a version of moral inquiry arising from “membership in a particular type of moral community” with the “encyclopaedist” conception of truth as universal and disinterested, as well as with the “genealogical” dismissal of reason as a mask for interests in their quest for power. A tradition so conceived may grow by transcending itself and extending its reach, but has no need to imperialize or condescend.⁴⁸

John Fiske was a model “encyclopaedist” both in the range of his interests and in his confidence in a universal truth. Yet with his vision fixed on the “ideal man” toward which evolution—via Anglo American tradition—tended, he shared the encyclopaedist inability, as MacIntyre describes it, to “enter imaginatively into the standpoint of those allegedly primitive and savage peoples” who stood in the way of this consummation.⁴⁹ But ultimately Fiske required even such advanced products of social evolution as the Chinese or the French to bend to the “Teutonic” standard. To spatialize a tradition, it seemed, was not only to extend its dominion, but to flatten the variegated landscape in which traditions can endure and flourish.

NOTES

1. William Stubbs, *Lectures on Modern English History* (London, 1906), 185.
2. Milton Berman, *John Fiske: The Evolution of a Popularizer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), is the most thorough treatment. Other studies include George Parsons Winston, *John Fiske* (New York, 1972); Henry Steele Commager, "John Fiske: An Interpretation," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 66 (1942): 332-45; Russel B. Nye, "John Fiske and His Cosmic Philosophy," *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters*, 28 (1942): 685-98; Jennings B. Sanders, "John Fiske," in *The Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography: By His Former Students at the University of Chicago*, ed. William T. Hutchinson (New York, 1937), 144-70; Philip P. Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism* (Cambridge, 1949), 129-51; and Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860-1930* (New Haven, 1977), 80-91. I discussed other aspects of Fiske's thought in "The Meaning of Freedom for George Bancroft and John Fiske," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, 10 (Spring 1969), 60-75, and *Worldly Theologians: The Persistence of Religion in Nineteenth Century American Thought* (Washington, D.C., 1981), 69-126.
3. Berman, *John Fiske*, 77-79, 84-85, 125; John Fiske to Abby Brooks, March 30, 1862 (FK 30), John Fiske to Rev. J.E. Barnes, May, 1860 (FK 1103), John Fiske to Herbert Spencer, September 29, 1871 (FK 1144): these items are reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California; John Fiske, *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy: Based on the Doctrine of Evolution, with Criticisms on the Positive Philosophy*, 4 vols. (Boston, 1874), 4:231-61. Although Fiske moved closer to Christian precepts in later years, he reassured his mother as early as 1872 of the "complete harmony" between Christianity and science. Fiske to Mary Stoughton, March 31, 1872 (FK 850): this item is reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Fiske rediscovered the virtues of Calvinism itself, not as a theology but as a tradition which, by leaving "the individual man alone in the presence of his God," had prepared the way for American liberty and democracy. John Fiske, *The Beginnings of New England or the Puritan Theocracy in its Relations to Civil and Religious Liberty* (Boston, 1896), 58, 246. H. Burnell Pannill, *The Religious Faith of John Fiske* (Durham, 1957) is helpful.
4. John Fiske, *The Discovery of America: With Some Account of Ancient America and the Spanish Conquest*, (2 vols., Boston, 1892); John Fiske, *The Critical Period of American History, 1783-1789* (Boston, 1888); Berman, *John Fiske*, 259.
5. Berman, *John Fiske*, 246. Charles M. Andrews faulted Fiske's lack of original research and ideas and noted the early fading of his influence in "John Fiske, Philosopher and Historian," *The Yale Review*, n.s., 7 (July 1918): 865-69.
6. Bronson Alcott, *The Journal of Bronson Alcott*, ed. Odell Shepard (Boston, 1938), 41 (April 24, 1834). Sacvan Bercovitch calls attention to this passage in *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York, 1993), 181.
7. James Russell Lowell, "A Great Public Character," in *Literary Essays: Among My Books, My Study Windows, Fireside Travels*, vol. 2, *The Works of James Russell Lowell* (Boston, 1899), 273-74.
8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1883), 2:297.
9. R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1955), 7. The terms were adopted from Emerson.
10. Extensive literature on these developments includes Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991); T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York, 1981); John C. Fraser, *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (Cambridge, England, 1982); Wallace Evan Davies, *Patriotism on Parade: The Story of Veterans' and Hereditary Organizations in America, 1783-1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955); Calder Loth and Julius Trousdale Sadler, Jr., *The Only Proper Style: Gothic Architecture in America* (Boston, 1975); Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia, 1986); David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1990); Maxwell Geismar, *Rebels and Ancestors: The American Novel, 1890-1915* (Boston, 1953); Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876-1986* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); James M. Lindgren, *Preserving the Old Dominion: Historic Preservation and Virginia Traditionalism* (Charlottesville, 1993) and *Preserving Historic New England: Preservation, Progressivism, and the Remaking of Memory* (New York, 1995).
11. "Recent Books on American History," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 65 (February 1890): 274.
12. Lindgren contends that historical preservation fundamentally "concerned what Michel Foucault called the 'relations of power.'" *Preserving Historic New England*, 5. For Lears's interpretation, see *No Place of Grace*, 7-32.
13. Edward Shils provides a serviceable definition of traditions as "beliefs, standards, and rules . . . which have been received from the preceding generation, through a process of continuous

transmission from generation to generation.” “Tradition and Liberty: Antinomy and Interdependence,” *Ethics*, 68 (April 1958): 154. See also J.G.A. Pocock, “Time, Institutions and Action: An Essay on Traditions and Their Understanding,” in *Politics and Experience: Essays Presented to Professor Michael Oakeshott on the Occasion of his Retirement*, eds. Preston King and B.C. Parekh (Cambridge, England, 1968), 212; and J.G.A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York, 1971), 234-37. Edward Alsworth Ross, in *Social Psychology: An Outline and Source Book* (New York, 1909), 196, made a still-useful distinction between tradition and custom. Custom, Ross pointed out, connotes “the transmission of a way of doing,” tradition “a way of thinking or believing.” The terms are often used interchangeably, however, and usage here depends on context. Important studies of the nature and function of tradition include Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago, 1981); S.N. Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change, and Modernity* (New York, 1973); David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, England, 1985); David Gross, *The Past in Ruins: Tradition and the Critique of Modernity* (Amherst, 1992); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983); and Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, 1984). Pelikan’s characterization of tradition (54-55) as an icon, pointing beyond itself (although ever in danger of becoming an idol—an end in itself) suggests another way to view Fiske’s use of tradition to sanction expansion.

14. George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1987), 53-54; George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York, 1968), 227. Christopher Shannon, *Conspicuous Criticism: Tradition, the Individual, and Culture in American Social Thought, from Veblen to Mills* (Baltimore, 1996), 88-90, discusses this point. See also George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900* (New York, 1992), 51-73.

15. Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, (3 vols. London, 1897), 1:13, 299, 423, 701; 2:321-22, 3:102, 106; Herbert Spencer, *First Principles* (repr., New York, 1958), 130; Fiske, *Cosmic Philosophy*, 4:20, 24.

16. John Fiske, *Excursions of an Evolutionist*, 16th ed. (Boston, 1894), 316-19; Fiske, *Cosmic Philosophy*, 3:289, 297, 313 (original italics omitted); 4:157-58.

17. Fiske, *Cosmic Philosophy*, 3:344.

18. *Ibid.*, 4:157-58, 161-62; John Fiske, *Through Nature to God* (Boston, 1899), 88, 97; John Fiske to Mary Stoughton, September 7, 1884 (FK 1039): this item is reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

19. John Fiske, *A Century of Science: And Other Essays* (Boston, 1899), 209, 213.

20. Fiske, *Cosmic Philosophy*, 4:27.

21. *Ibid.*, 3:292, 344.

22. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. Trans. F.L. Pogson (London, 1913), 237; Ricardo J. Quinones, *Mapping Literary Modernism: Time and Development* (Princeton, 1985), 38, 68, 71-72. In 1927 Wyndham Lewis decried modernist development of a “cult of Time” at the expense of the “greater reality” of space in *Time and Western Man* (Boston, 1957), 211-12, 429. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983) is essential for understanding the meanings of the two terms in the period.

23. Stephen Spender, *Love-Hate Relations: English and American Sensibilities* (New York, 1974), 15, 77-78.

24. Walter Scott, ed., *Sir Tristrem; a Metrical Romance of the Thirteenth Century; by Thomas of Erceuldoune Called the Rhymer*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh, 1811), xxvii-xxviii (cited by Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 272); George P. Marsh, *The Goths in New-England: A Discourse Delivered at the Anniversary of the Philomathesian Society of Middlebury College, August 15, 1843* (Middlebury [Vt.], 1843), 33. T.S. Eliot made a prerequisite of tradition the persistence of “the same people living in the same place.” *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (New York, 1934), 18.

25. John Fiske, *Life Everlasting* (Boston, 1901), 57; John Fiske, *The Idea of God as Affected by Modern Knowledge* (Boston, 1900), 45. Cf. John Fiske, *Through Nature to God* (Boston, 1899), 115. Loom images were popular among historians of the time. Edward Eggleston wrote that “athwart the warp of traditional continuity there is woven the woof of variation; the pattern changes by degrees, but the web is without break or seam.” Edward Eggleston, *The Transit of Civilization from England to America in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1901), 207.

26. William B. Weedon, *Economic and Social History of New England, 1620-1789*, (2 vols., Williamstown, Mass., 1978), 1:19; William B. Weedon, “The Development of the American People,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 13 (April 1899): 29; Lois Kimball Mathews [Rosenberry], *The Expansion of New England: The Spread of New England Settlement and Institutions to the Mississippi River, 1620-1865* (repr., New York, 1962), 1-5, 10, 250, 261.

27. J.W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, England, 1981), 22.

28. Henry Sumner Maine, *Village-Communities in the East and West* (orig., 1889; repr., New York, 1974), 107-8, 146, 166; Henry Sumner Maine, *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions* (New York, 1875), 388. J.W. Burrow discusses the influence of these ideas in “The Village

Community' and the Uses of History in Late Nineteenth-Century England," in *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of J.H. Plumb*, ed. Neil McKendrick (London, 1974), 255-84.

29. Fiske, *Century of Science*, 271; Edward Augustus Freeman, *Lectures to American Audiences* (Philadelphia, 1882), 10-12; Edward Augustus Freeman, *The Growth of the English Constitution from the Earliest Times* (New York, 1890), 41; Edward Augustus Freeman, *History of Federal Government in Greece and Italy*, 2d ed. (London, 1893), 38-39, 60-64, 82-84. J.W. Burrow discusses Freeman's views of history in *Liberal Descent*, 195-208 and in "'Village Community,'" 263-69.

30. John Fiske, *Old Virginia and Her Neighbours*, (2 vols. Boston, 1897), 1:228, 2:147-48; Fiske, *Beginnings of New England*, 24-25; John Fiske, *American Political Ideas: Viewed from the Standpoint of Universal History* (New York, 1885), 18, 36-37, 41. Cf. Freeman, *English Constitution*, 17-18.

31. Fiske, *Century of Science*, 289, 294-95; John Fiske, "The Story of a New England Town," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 86 (December 1900): 726, 735.

32. Fiske, *American Political Ideas*, 35; Fiske, *Old Virginia*, 2:42-44, 147-49, 323-24; John Fiske, *The Dutch and Quaker Colonies in America* (2 vols. Boston, 1899), 1:225; Fiske, *Century of Science*, 305.

33. Fiske, *Beginnings of New England*, 49-52.

34. *Ibid.*, 7-12, 20-25 (original italics omitted).

35. Fiske, *Cosmic Philosophy*, 4:33; Fiske, *American Political Ideas*, 87, 91, 105, 120-24, 129; Fiske, *Beginnings of New England*, 25-26, 52, 58, 246-47; Fiske, *Critical Period*, 64.

36. Fiske, *Cosmic Philosophy*, 4:147-48.

37. Fiske, *American Political Ideas*, 6, 87-88, 91-93; Fiske, "New England Town," 723-24. Although Fiske's best-known volume of American history, *The Critical Period*, portrayed the United States government under the Articles of Confederation as unacceptably weak, he cautioned emphatically in the same work (237-38) against too much centralization of power. Lewis O. Saum contends that Fiske anticipated Frederick Jackson's "frontier thesis" in his appreciation of the social and political importance of western settlement. "John Fiske and the West," *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 48 (Winter 1985): 47-68.

38. Fiske, *American Political Ideas*, 123, 128, 146-47, 151-52.

39. *Ibid.*, 92-93.

40. *Ibid.*, 143.

41. Fiske, *Discovery of America*, 1:23; Fiske, *Excursions*, 103; John Fiske, *Darwinism, and Other Essays*, new ed., rev. and enl. (Boston, 1886), 242; Berman, *John Fiske*, 251-52.

42. Fiske, *Century of Science*, 211-12.

43. John Fiske, *Colonization of the New World*, vol. 21 of *A History of All Nations* (Philadelphia, 1905), 43.

44. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), 222.

45. Fiske, *Discovery of America*, 1:vi, 130-31; 2:290-91, 319-38, 405.

46. *Ibid.*, 1:33, 49n-50n; 2:261, 292.

47. Quinones, *Mapping Literary Modernism*, 257.

48. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, 1990), 59-60, 65, 125. Cf. Richard Rorty: "we must work by our own lights . . . What we cannot do is rise above all human communities, actual and possible." *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, vol. 1 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge, England, 1991), 38. See also Shannon, *Conspicuous Criticism*, xi-xv.

49. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 182.