

Our Social Heritage

By W. F. OGBURN

ONLY within the past decade have we come to recognize the importance of our social heritage, in comparison with our biological inheritance. Formerly, when one spoke of heredity and environment, the term environment usually meant nature only. The great significance of the environment that we now call the social heritage was forgotten, or else more probably thought of as the direct product of man's inherited nature.

The social heritage is a great concept and it will take the social sciences a long time to work out its full meaning. But something of its significance can be seen from its definition. It is that which surrounds us other than the natural environment of soil, climate, fauna and flora. It consists not only of buildings, machines and fabricated material objects but of ways of acting and thinking that find expression in religion, philosophy, art, science, ethical codes, and social institutions, and in this it is synonymous with culture. This is the environment that makes personality, that brings freedom or tyranny, that determines beliefs and gives us knowledge. In the present era it is a great complex, called civilization, that is undergoing rapid change, which has brought many maladjustments and social problems, but which we hope to improve. This is the world which we hope to construct into a "Kingdom of God on earth" rather than into a "Garden of Eden."

As the family is the almost universal institution through which the biological inheritance is passed on from one generation to another, so also the family is universally important as an agency for passing on the social heritage, though not the exclusive agency, for there are, of course, other patterns almost as universal as the family in continuing the social heritage, as for instance, the community, industry and religious organizations.

Cultural heritage through the family is twofold, though the dividing line between these two aspects is not altogether sharp. First, the family is an instrument for shaping personality in the children, for determining, for instance, whether the child is to be timid, honest, conservative, or otherwise. Second, it is also a means for passing on the content of the social heritage, for transmitting the knowledge of the ways of doing things, that does not enter so intimately into the character, such for instance as the transmission of the knowledge of language or of how to work.

That our social heritage is a very powerful influence in building personality is being increasingly appreciated, as the specific role of instinct is being shown to be less and less and as habit is known to be of greater significance. Behavior among human beings is not as rigidly determined by biological inheritance as it is among the lower animals. The extent to which any human being will be fearful or courageous, daring or indifferent and the sorts of situations that will call forth these reactions are determined largely by his experience. Thus the Crow Indians, living in the milieu of warring nations, inculcate personal bravery in their youths to a higher degree than people living in a less warlike setting,

by the elaborate system which they have developed for training and encouraging bravery.

Another discovery of modern psychology emphasizes still more how much personality is the product of habit. This discovery is that of the conditioned reflex, a special form of habit. For instance, the pupil of the eye, by inherited nature contracting and expanding to variations of light, can be trained to contract at the ringing of a bell. Much of our behavior that was thus once thought of as instinctive has now been found to be the habit of conditioned reflexes. So it would seem that poets are largely made poets, not born poets, that certainly much of what we call feminine and masculine traits are the product of our culture, that so-called genius can never be wholly a matter of inheritance, and so on. As research shows the specific role of instinct to be growing less than was formerly held, just to that extent is our social heritage found to be more important in forming personality.

The family takes rank unquestionably as the social institution of greatest influence, through which our social heritage forms personality. The family environment exercises the earliest influence that the new-born child knows. As the twig is bent, so grows the tree. The earlier the influence the more important it is. It was formerly thought that the personality was completed only when one became an adult. Then the limit was shortened to the age of adolescence. Later it was said that the personality was virtually set by five years of age, and now one hears that the most important influences have got in their work by two years of age.

The family is significant also because of its repetition of stimuli. A limited number of stimuli from mother, nurse, father, brothers, sisters are repeated many times a day. The power of this repetition at an early age is very great. Little drops of water often enough will wear away a large stone. In biological inheritance the contributions of mother and father are equal by chance, but in forming personality in early life, the contribution of the mother would seem to be greater, custom being as it is. Furthermore the role of the affections, so important for personality, is nurtured in the home, and is associated with the members of the family.

PERHAPS it may seem unwise to try to choose for first ranking in importance in determining personality from the three groups of tendencies, the self-preservative, the affectional, or the gregarious. But the studies of disorders of personality, as they appear in neuroses and psychoses, rank the affectional elements as most significant, perhaps because of their possibly greater variability and the readiness with which conditioning occurs in connection with love. The most fertile theory of the functional origin of mental disorders is that the causes are the emotional habits arising out of the early family situation. This hypothesis is maintained even when the precipitating causes of the disaster occur in later life, for, it is argued, these precipitating causes are effective only when the foundation has been laid in the emotional patterns of early childhood.

In accordance with this modern theory of the powerful influence of culture on the personality, researches have been showing that much of what was once thought to have been heredity is in reality the family influence, particularly of the early years of life. Biometricians, for example, show a high correlation of the occupations of fathers and sons, just as they have shown a high correlation between the stature of fathers and sons; and, this correlation between the occupations of fathers and sons has been interpreted, like the similarities of stature, as due to biological inheritance. But when father and son are both lawyers, one should hesitate to assert that the coincidence is due to biological inheritance. The social reasons why the son follows the vocation of the father are not far to seek. By the same reasoning it might be argued that because son, father, grandfather and other ancestors were fishermen, this fact was determined by inherited natural tendencies. Resemblances between parent and child are not to be attributed wholly to heredity; many are due to the strong influences of parents on their young.

THAT these cultural influences of family life are important is seen from the fact that there are differences in personality according to order of birth. Thus the oldest child tends to be different from the middle children, and the middle children different from the youngest, and the only child tends to have distinguishing characteristics. Biologists say that these differences in personality could hardly be due to differences in the germ plasms. Heredity doesn't explain why the oldest child should be different from the only child.

Since so many environmental influences in the home are the same for all the children, it is evident from these differences in children according to their order of birth, that a comparatively slight variation may be far-reaching and subtle. A. A. Brill has shown (Introduction to Psychoanalysis) that the only child is found among neurotics in unusually large numbers, and that he is less fitted for the struggle for existence than other children. Yet the only child is also exceptional in achievement. From my own unpublished researches it seems clear that he appears in Who's Who more frequently than in the general population. So, also, only children marry later in life and smaller percentages of only children are married than of other children. The names of oldest children also appear in Who's Who more frequently in proportion to their total number than do the names of middle children, while the youngest children appear more frequently than middle children but less frequently than the oldest children. There are also differences between children and order of birth in regard to radicalism; and it seems probable that the incidence of insanity is slightly unequal according to the order of birth.

The family is becoming much smaller; there are many families with only one child and not many with three children. This change in the size of the family will have an effect on the personality of the children. Perhaps it may increase the percentage of exceptionally capable children mentally, but it may also result in an increase of nervousness and mental disorders. The obvious types of family influence are quite well known, but for that reason are frequently taken for granted. The newer evidence of the family influence on personality comes from the studies of nervous disorders and the phenomena of the conditioned reflex. Thus it appears, for instance, that the role of a dominant,

unaffectionate, disciplinary type of father is of tremendous influence in forming the personality of the child. The child may develop a reaction of rebellion against his father and acquire a pattern of reaction that may be set in motion later in life by many other stimuli than the original one of the father. Thus the institution of the police, of the courts, of an authoritarian government may arouse hostility, and indeed the individual with such childhood experiences may develop from this action pattern a whole social philosophy of, say, *laissez-faire* liberalism.

So also it seems true that the sort of stimuli that are most effective in arousing feelings of affection and hate are like the stimuli of members of the family operating in early childhood. Emotional patterns are set up in early childhood that often are so particularized that they can be aroused in later life only by individuals who resemble these members of the family around whom the patterns were first built. Thus one may be able to have as close friends, lovers, husbands or wives, only those who resemble strongly a parent, brother, sister, or playmate.

It is true, of course, that not all of these early cultural influences on personality operate through the medium of the family alone. Play groups outside the family and the schools for very young children are the next most important groups. Possibly the changing family may lose to such groups as these some of its functions in forming the personality of its very young members, as it appears to be losing other functions. But in so far as the personality factors exercise their functions at very early ages, the family is likely to continue as the main influence in forming the personality of the children.

The function of passing on the content of the social heritage, such as language, for example, the family shares with other social institutions. Thus the churches carry on the religious tradition. The various economic organizations for manufacture and commerce carry on the stream of the social heritage for their particular province, quite generally without the services of the family, as also, in their respective fields, the schools, libraries and other societies and groups.

IT is possible that during the past two or three thousand years in Europe the family has as a functioning social institution reached the highest point which it has ever attained within the 100,000 years more or less that there has been human society. But within the past century there has been a precipitous fall from this pinnacle. The functions of the family have been declining very rapidly since the invention of the factory run by steam, aided by innumerable numbers of mechanical inventions. In the agricultural era which preceded this industrial age, the functions performed largely by the family were six—affectional, economic, recreational, protective, religious and educational. Spinning, weaving, sewing, the production of food, the preparation of food, laundering, the production of soap, and many other economically productive functions have all left the aegis of the family in whole or in part, changing the nature of the employment of men and women, and particularly taking away from women their ancient employment. The loss of economic functions is most noticeable in the large modern city among apartment-house dwellers, less developed among families in the smaller towns and in the country.

Other functions of the family have similarly declined. Recreation is found outside the home. In earlier times

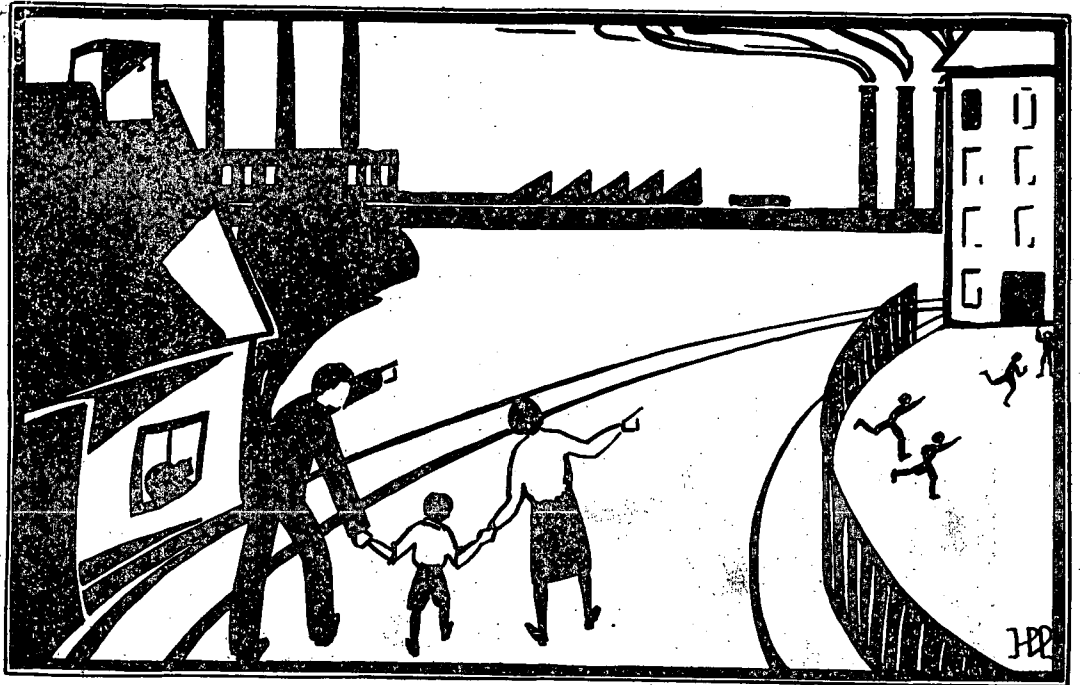
education, very broadly conceived, was in large part a function of the family, including physical education, manual training, domestic science, and vocational education. Today very few of these forms of education remain in the home. In feudal times the protection of the home, the women, children, the aged and dependent kin, was in part a function of the father and male relative. The loss of these functions has been due in large part to the mechanical inventions resulting in the growth of cities and factories. Perhaps the loss of the religious functions, which even determined that only persons of certain religious affiliations could

inter-marry and found a family, seems due to changes in the nature of religious beliefs rather than to economic and mechanical changes.

These losses of functions may mean that the spindle and the loom have now completely disappeared as symbols of home life, and the laundry tub, the sewing machine, family games and the prayer book are following them. Indeed the cooking stove, the broom and even the cradle seem to be taking flight also! The invention and diffusion of methods of birth control must take rank with steam and the multi-family dwelling as significant inventions affecting the family. It has been particularly the means of a great reduction in the number of children, which has cut down the activities of the family in a purely quantitative way so that they are comprised in a very short period.

Some of these functions which are an integral part of social life have not disappeared but have simply shifted from the family to other social agencies, especially to the industries, with their welfare work, and to the state, that is, all the organs of city, county, state, provincial and national governments. The decline of the *laissez-faire* theory of government is due in large part to the decline of the family, a cause not usually recognized, especially by conservatives. The great extension of government by commissions and boards to so many different fields has as a cause the changes in the modern family. The juvenile court and the school take the place of the parent for the time and in regard to certain matters. We even say that modern government is "paternalistic," fatherly. The decline of the family is thus a cause of the great wave of governmental control that is spreading over all modern governments, and is in part also a cause of the drift in the direction of socialism. Also in many communities, or particularly the industrially-owned towns, industries with their elaborate welfare plans have developed functions which were formerly performed by the family but which cannot well be performed by them under the new conditions.

Moreover, the trend in the loss of functions shows little



Drawing by Helen Phelps

Even if the family doesn't produce thread and cloth and medicine and food and lessons, it can still produce happiness

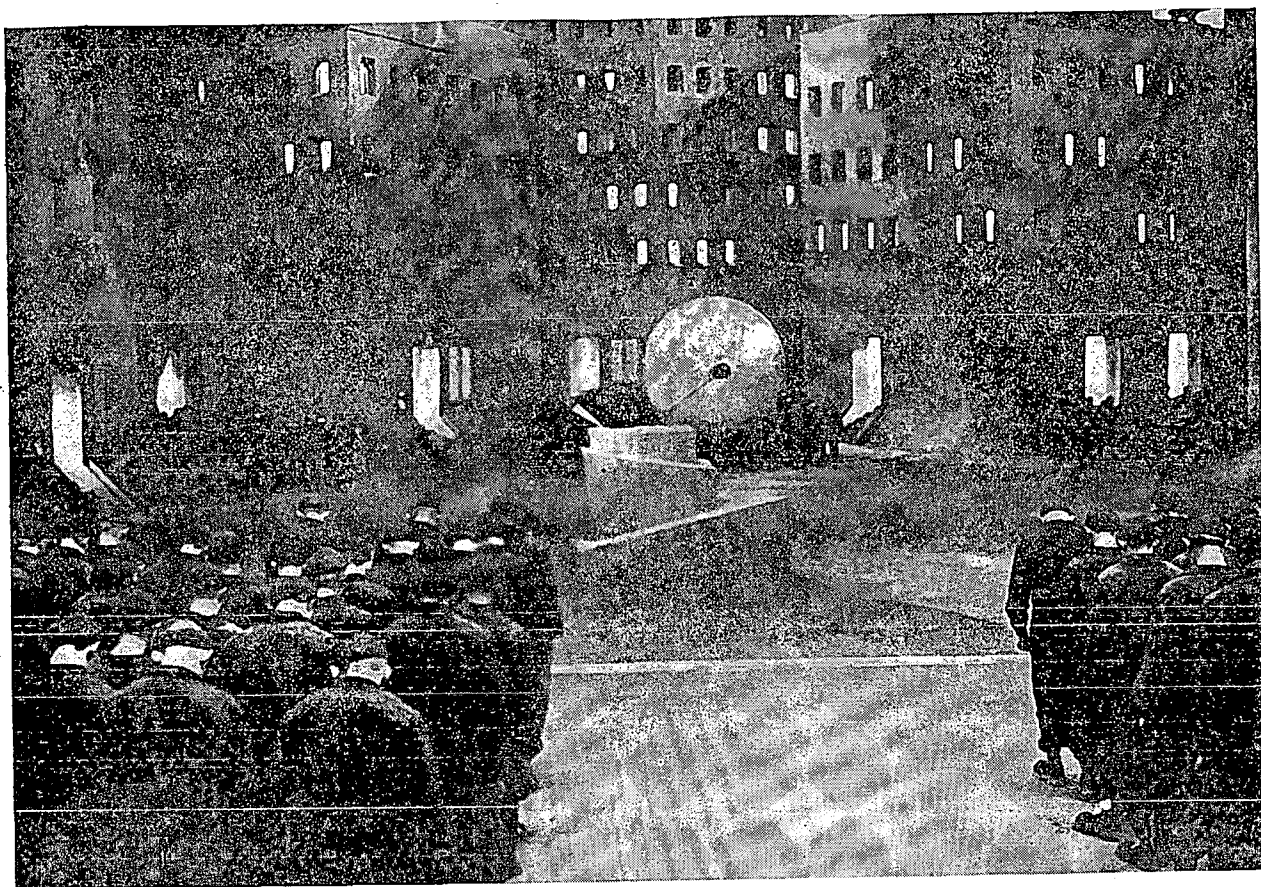
slackening and no tendency to turn and move in the opposite direction. Manufacturing is growing much faster than agriculture. Women are entering industry at a greater rate than the growth of population. The schools are taking the children at earlier ages. Protective legislation and paternalistic government activities are increasing. Recreation is becoming more commercialized and finds expression outside the family. These trends are effective for rural homes and in the towns as well as among city dwellers.

It is very difficult to predict the future, particularly in the social sciences. Furthermore, prediction is accurate usually in inverse ratio to the length of time it covers. So, for the immediate future one may simply observe that the trends seem to be moving as they have in the past. One may further speculate that as many of these changes in the family have been due to mechanical inventions which produced factories and cities, so new mechanical inventions may in the future, again quite change the course of the family. But what the new inventions will be can not be told. The radio, for instance, may be an invention that will help to return certain activities to the home. The cheaper and wider distribution of electricity, if accompanied by certain mechanical inventions, might tend to restore industries to the home. New inventions again may revolutionize the family in opposite directions.

THIS brief analysis has been a record of facts or of probable facts. There has been no attempt to say whether they are good or bad. Yet perhaps we may venture to speculate a little regarding their value.

That the family environment is so important for personality is a fact of prime significance. It puts a great deal of responsibility on parents; and this new knowledge raises the family to new and greater importance. But one must not assume that the family influence on personality is wholly good, even from religious households. What has been shown is that the

(Continued on page 341)



The Future of Labor—a German Film Forecast

These scenes of a monstrous machine and the subterranean homes of the workers, in a city of the future, are from the motion picture *Metropolis*, adapted from the Ufa film by Famous Players-Lasky. "In dear old 1898," says H. G. Wells of its philosophy, "it may have been excusable to symbolize social relations in this way, but that was thirty years ago, and a lot of thinking and some experience intervene." Today labor has its own program for preserving the integrity of its family life, according to Mr. Muste's article.

