

Editorial: A Social, Not National Characteristic

At a recent public meeting in New York city a speaker remarked that the American people were greatly given to the worship of official titles; a lecturer, he said, who has a title of some sort or other—Alderman, professor, etc.—prefixed to his name would attract a large audience, whereas one not thusly equipped with a prefix would draw no crowd.

This opinion is one of many belonging to a large and harmful class, to wit: the class of opinions that confound, with American characteristics, characteristics that are in no way peculiarly American.

The German Dramatist Kotzebue wrote an amusing comedy entitled, *Die Deutschen Kleinstaedter* (German Provincialist) in which the hankering after prefixes to names among the German provincials is humorously illustrated; of the same tendency is the great Moliere's comedy, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (The Would-be Titled Tradesman), which illustrates the similar feature among the French; Falstaff and Poins, in Shakespeare, teach us that a similar weakness exists in certain classes in England; Calderon's and Lope de Vega's comedies ridicule that identical leaning among the Spaniards; the Dutch novelist, Van Lennen, makes no end of fun of that very failing among certain classes of the population of Holland. And so forth and so on.

The respect for titles or official prefixes to names is not a national weakness, or the feature of any one nation or race; it

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consequently is no more American than German, no more Spanish than Dutch; it is a feature of only such portions of the population of every nation, without exception, as are still in a provincial stage of culture.

Sharp distinction on these lines, and a clear-cut conception of what are and what are not, indeed, national characteristics, are essential nowadays when the word "American" is being bandied about by so many conflicting mouths.

It is a serious error, that opens the doors to the falsest of political tactics, to mix up popular characteristics, that are determined solely by the stages of intellectual development reached by the several layers of the population of all nations, with characteristics that are purely national. The two are children of different parents; it is, nevertheless, easy to confound them. They must be rigorously kept apart by all who are engaged in the social question.

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*A De Leon editorial transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the
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