1991

Foreword, "Modern Civil Procedure: Issues in Controversy"

George L. Priest
Yale Law School

Judyth W. Pendell

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss_papers

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss_papers/619

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Yale Law School Faculty Scholarship at Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship Series by an authorized administrator of Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact julian.aiken@yale.edu.
Despite the seemingly universal introduction of social science methods of instruction, the staples of legal education today differ little from those of many decades ago. Even the most sophisticated modern lawyer continues to remember and understand the basic principles of civil law in terms of rules propounded to resolve discrete disputes between two single parties. If asked to name the foundations of our civil law, the lawyer today, like the lawyer of the 1920s, would almost certainly list Pennoyer v. Neff, Hadley v. Baxendale, Brown v. Kendall, and, perhaps, Palsgraf v. Long Island R.R. Company. These cases are recognized today as possessing a certain quaintness, but they remain the building blocks from which our conceptions of civil liability derive.

Regrettably, this conception of civil law is becoming increasingly anachronistic. The caseload of the modern civil judge is less likely to be dominated by an action involving an attempt to collect on a note against land (Pennoyer), or damages for delay in delivery (Hadley), or for suffering a hit from a stick (Brown) or a scale (Palsgraf), than by an action involving the joinder of multiple parties with complex third-party liability claims asserting a causative link that requires complicated scientific understanding. However deeply they are revered, our ancient cases provide no more than a starting point for the unravelling of the difficult issues that are progressively overwhelming modern civil litigation.

There should be no surprise, of course, that modern litigation is becoming increasingly complex. Though surely our modern life and standard of living have become more sophisticated, the increased complexity of modern litigation is not solely the result of the advance of technology; it is also the result of our expanding conceptions of civil responsibility and of the broader liability standards that directly derive from those conceptions. Our civil
liability regime is committed as never before to the careful and comprehensive pursuit of all sources of modern harm, no matter how remote. The increasing complexity of modern litigation necessarily follows.

Although the question has not yet received careful study, it must be accepted that as a civil liability regime adopts more broad and complicated conceptions of liability and damages, it will generate more complex disputes that, in turn, will require a more intricate civil procedure to resolve. The civil procedure well-suited for disputes such as Brown v. Kendall or Palsgraf, or even the routine auto litigation of the 1950s or 1960s, may not be so well-suited for litigation involving scientific complexity, such as cases arising from use of the defoliating Agent Orange, or class actions, such as those involving asbestos or the Dalkon Shield, where the size of the potential class mushrooms into the tens of thousands or millions, not including those with inchoate claims.

The articles of this symposium address issues implicated by the complexity of modern litigation and the increasingly complicated and voluminous caseload of our modern civil courts. Among them, they analyze the development of the class action device of Rule 23 and other aggregative methods of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure; the increasing demands for congressional involvement in the problems of excessive costs and delay in the federal courts; the serious problems associated with a procedural system that only loosely constrains the introduction of expert “scientific” testimony and the potential role of non-adjudicative means of evaluating scientific evidence; the incentives and effects of potential changes in cost and fee allocations; and the powers of our civil courts in the context of mass litigation. The articles are attended by excellent commentary by judges and academics.

The articles and comments were initially presented at a symposium entitled “Modern Civil Procedure: Issues in Controversy,” held in New Haven, Connecticut on June 15-16, 1990, under the joint sponsorship of the Yale Law School Program in Civil Liability and Aetna Life & Casualty Company. More than 125 judges, practitioners, academics, and corporate executives attended the conference and engaged in spirited debate and discussion. The articles and comments have been extensively revised in response to this excellent commentary. The symposium was intentionally focused upon “issues” and “controversy” because the problems raised by a
civil liability regime that is rapidly changing and developing are less amenable to attempts to contrive some single "solution," than by increasing and accelerated efforts of adaptation in order to preserve our country's commitment to civil justice.