The Economic Interpretation of History.

THE standpoint from which one approaches the study of society or history is of the first importance. All depends on the answer to the question as to the cause of social progress. What is the reason for great changes in human thought and human life? What is the underlying motive force in social action?

Until the middle of the last century little or no attention was given to the subject of causation in history. A mere record of political events, dynasties, and military campaigns makes up the contents of the early histories. The old conception of society viewed history as a series of biographies of the great men who had successively appeared and drawn society onward. This was the "One Man Theory."

From this viewpoint Martin Luther was reckoned as the one person who by force of character and strength of will, brought about the Reformation. It was never seen that for years the old forms of Feudalism had been giving way, and the trading Bourgeoise rising into power, that a new individualism was coming into existence and that the religious change was only a small part of the great industrial economic change that was transforming all of society. Martin Luther was but the person whom conditions had produced and that the tide of events bore to the top and made its mouthpiece. He in himself had no power to stay or bring a Reformation. Years before other priests had said the same as Luther, but their words had no effect, for economic conditions were not ripe for change.

Again, Oliver Cromwell has been written of as the one individual who had the power to overthrow Charles I. and set a curb to the unrestrained power of monarchs. The conditions that made a Cromwell possible had been gathering for generations. He represented the bourgeoise power, that was undermining the strength of the nobility. The struggle between Charles and Cromwell represented a conflict of great economic forces embodies in different economic classes.

Napoleon has filled pages of our histories. But Napoleon would have been no Napoleon if conditions had not worked together to make such a man possible. He was the product of the volcanic forces of the French Revolution. In France the trading class was growing in power. Napoleon simply stood for the interests of that class. He came in on the Revolutionary wave and because of the disorganized condition of France his domination was possible and natural.

Society, then, is not advanced to higher planes through the influence of individual great men. It is plain that great social changes arise from causes that strike roots deep down in the life of the mass of the people.

History written as it was, consisting only of a record of ruling dynasties, of kings, great men, battles and conquests, was a useless study. It must be a matter of the greatest surprise to a student of history, who has advanced beyond the point where he views it merely as an account of all these to note the slight reference to the industrial life of the people that historians content themselves with making. For instance, take the guilds, commercial and industrial, that played so prominent a part in civilized society for so many centuries, and yet it is but recently that any interest has been taken in the subject. In fact, we may say that industrial history itself has had its birth and development within the last half century.

Heretofore history had no continuity. It was conceived of as a series of isolated stages. There was no attempt to point out the growth of one stage from another. There was no effort to trace the thread of progress or the line of cause and effect that runs throughout society.

Not only did history lack continuity in time, but it was written by nations and had no connection geographically. We saw the rise and fall of kings in England and France, in Greece and Rome, in Egypt and Assyria, but that any of these exercised any influence on each other was utterly disregarded. No broad, continuous view of society was dreamed of. We pigeon-holed each country, and saw no relation of events.

A history of institutions was unknown and from the general view of things it was quite natural that all such institutions should be supposed to be eternal. The growth of present forms from earlier ones was inconceivable. To-day, under the influence of the theory of evolution, we have come to see that whether it be governments or industrial arts, whether it be customs or beliefs, we can no more understand their present forms without a study of their earlier forms than the chemist can understand the compound without reducing it to its elements.

Further there had not yet grown up that critical period in history that not only looked with critical eye on the conclusions but as well examined carefully all historical sources—throwing out the myths and fables and heroic tales that had gathered around the true thread of history.

It was Neibuhr who first began this work of freeing history from its mass of vagaries. Freeman yet further revolutionized the treatment of history. He pointed out that different races represent various stages of a common evolution. For example,

Japan has but recently passed through a stage of evolution that England had gone through a century ago. In other words, there is one great evolution, through which society as a whole is passing. Some races have gone on to higher stages, others have but reached a medium place yet. This gave rise to comparative history, and the tracing of the growth of institutions from nation to nation.

Up to the middle of the last century there was little or no philosophy of history and what there was, was more or less idealistic. Here we come to the broad dividing line between the position we are attempting to explain, the economic view of society, and the idealist's position. The idealistic position holds that ideas move society. A man may conceive a good thing and then persuade men to adopt it. In other words, as one writer has said, "Beautiful schemes may be thought out and then applied to society from without by propaganda." Hegel was one of the first to attempt a philosophy of history. He greatly influenced the thought of his time, and produced a revolution in philosophy by pointing out that all history is an evolution, not a collection of disconnected facts, as his predecessors had said. But Hegel's interpretation was, after all, idealistic. He clung to the belief that things develop themselves according to some "eternal idea." His great work really consisted in the discovery of a new method of thought and the principal thing that marked this method was the idea of process or development that ran through it. It was this method that once freed from its idealism laid the foundation for the economic view of society. It was this method that Hegel used when he stated that the history of society is the history of successive waves, and that Marx later employed when he described it as a series of class struggles.

Still another attempt of an idealistic character to explain the progress of society is known as the political interpretation of history. As pointed out by Prof. Seligmann, this holds substantially "that throughout all history there can be discerned a definite movement from monarchy to aristocracy, from aristocracy to democracy," and "a constant progress from absolutism to freedom." But "political change is not a primary, but a secondary phenomenon."

Finally, a third idealistic view of society has been held by those who have believed they saw in religion the keynote of social advance. As pointed out by numerous writers, religion is really a product and not a cause.

These three lines include practically all the important attempts to explain social growth from the idealist's standpoint. It was now possible for an interpretation of history to arise based on physical relations. Buckle's name is the one earliest connected

with the doctrine of physical environment. He explained that all psychical forces are conditioned by physical environment. He claimed that in early society the history of wealth depended entirely on climate and soil. He confined himself wholly to production, principally to the production of the food supply. He gave little attention to the problem of distribution and in fact confessed himself unable to deal with it.

The task that Buckle was unable to accomplish fell upon the shoulders of one well fitted to grapple with this intricate problem. Karl Marx was the originator of the idea of the economic interpretation of history. Buckle went no further than working out the effect of physical forces on production. Marx pointed out the fundamental character of economic changes in every phase of social life. His proposition was "that in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch."

Marx had been profoundly influenced by the writings of Hegel, as had many another young German of that time. He recognized, however, what others did not, that Hegel's work consisted of two parts and that the idea of process running through his method was the valuable thing. Combining with this method his studies in natural science, he arrived at the theory that "all social institutions are the result of growth, and that the causes of this growth are to be sought not in any idea but in the conditions of material existence."

It is fairly well accepted that society as a whole may be compared to an organism. Its institutions, the superstructures, are determined in their form by the manner in which society produces and distributes its goods. An analogy between the social organism and that of a plant or animal may be drawn from the field of biology.

That the organs of animals are the result of conditions is shown by numerous examples. In countries where wolves are forced to feed mainly upon deer, the long, slim wolf has the best opportunity to survive, and in time the wolves in that locality become long-legged, slender animals.

At the same time nature economizes her resources, no material or energy is wasted in the struggle for existence. Everything is used in the most advantageous manner. In biology this is seen in the decay of certain organs when they grow useless, that are then said to have atrophied as well as in the growth or development of organs and faculties that have become necessary. The wings of the tame duck have atrophied or shriveled under domestication. Civilized man's senses of smell and hearing have grown

less acute than those of the savage, as they are called less into use. Exactly so, social institutions decay when the purpose for which they existed disappears and new institutions arise to meet new needs.

Prof Sumner of Yale says, "The notion that progress proceeds in the first instance from intellectual or moral stimulus, or that progress is really something in the world of thought and not of sense, has led to the most disappointing and abortive efforts to teach and elevate inferior races and neglected classes. The ancestors of the present civilized races did not win their civilization by any such path. They built it up through centuries of toil from a foundation of surplus material means, which they won through improvements in the industrial arts and in the economic organization."

Industrial life, the way in which men get their living is dominant, and as reasoning beings we must, no matter what ideals we may have cherished, deal with present facts and acknowledge the fundamental character of economic—of physical conditions. Throughout all the superstructures that have grown upon this foundation—governments, literature, ethics and education—there may be traced the predominating influence of the economic conditions of the time and place in which they were evolving.

For an illustration of this, let us turn to the field of ethics. It is well known that ethics is usually spoken of as a purely normative science, that is, one that outlines a certain system of laws for the governing of human action according to ideas of right and wrong. Within recent years there has grown up another side to ethical studies—the study of the actual relations of men in society at different periods and in different places and the tracing of the development of the idea of right and wrong. A large number of the economists have seen the relation that actually existing ethical systems in distinction from ideal systems bear to economic conditions. Marshall makes economic conditions among the most powerful in determining ethical relations. Patten likewise points out the economic foundations of morality. While Marx shows that as all other spheres of society arise from economics so ethics depend on the same cause.

Each great economic change has brought a corresponding change in codes of ethics. Men still in a state of savage warfare viewed certain acts as right. In the nomadic state virtues suited to the time appeared. With agricultural pursuits new changes arose, while industrial growth and modern capitalism have yet further modified the moral code.

Among warlike tribes any form of aggression was considered as one of the highest of virtues. At a certain stage of society, while tribes struggled with each other over their hunting and

fishing grounds, the very existence of the tribe depended on the boldness of its members. Fighting power, as Leslie Stephen points out, was the essential power of each race, hence we find a cultivation of the military virtues. The strong warrior was especially held in esteem by the Norse and ancient Gauls. Aggression in different forms continued throughout the period of savagery and into semi-civilized and civilized society until a new economic condition was introduced. Co-operation of some sort became necessary between men. They were forced together industrially and gradually aggression became a vice.

Again in European history we find constant accounts of the robberies committed by the Robber Barons. "At the opening of the 16th century public opinion not merely sanctioned open plunder by the wearer of spurs and by the possessor of a stronghold, but regarded it as his special prerogative, the exercise of which was honorable rather than disgraceful." Society offered no condemnation of these acts until economic change gave rise to the trading class. As this class grew in strength and social power public opinion began to look unfavorably on the nobles when they fell upon a train of merchandise. The trading class interests had now become powerful enough to dominate public opinion and open robbery finally became a vice.

One more example can be found in the old illustration from American history. So long as slavery in the North was profitable it was viewed as right, but when the long winters of the Northern States showed that hired labor was more economical, it became wrong. The industrial interests of the North caused the Civil War. It was fought for the purpose of making free labor cheaper than slave labor.

So we find that the economic conditions impress themselves on the literature, the government and the forms of education that exist in any period.

The supporter of the economic view of history is sometimes charged with laying his emphasis solely on the present environment. In fact, however, he takes into full consideration the other factors. At no time does he maintain that each stage of society begins *tabula rasa*. While he does lay particular stress on environment he fully recognizes the existence of heredity and that there are always the survivals of former stages that exert their influence upon the new conditions and institutions. In other words, we may say that the form and structure of the social organism is in a continual process of change and at any given time any portion of the organism—any institution or system of beliefs —is the product of a series of successive environments acting each in turn upon the product of the preceding environment.

Of first importance is the method by which social advance

has been made. The conflict of the ages has been between man and his environment. The question has been, how to gain control over the forces around him and turn them to his own and to the social good. "From the outset," as pointed out by Lester F. Ward, "there have been obstacles to the satisfaction of desire to remove which has required greater or less effort, and it is this effort that has resulted in change. In the animal world this effort (removal of obstacles) is mainly subjective. It transforms the organism, modifies organs, multiplies structures, and creates new varieties, species and classes. In man it does this too, but only to a limited extent. There the principal effects are modification of the environment to adapt it to the organs and faculties that he already possesses."

Primitive man faced the problem of providing himself with the barest wants of life—food, clothing, shelter. His slight knowledge, crude tools and material limited these to the scantiest amount possible and at the same time gave him little leisure from manual toil. Gradually as the rough stone tool gave place to the better bronze axe or the later iron implements, his wants multiplied and were better satisfied and at the same time leisure for some slight intellectual development was afforded.

Each improvement in technique and each new invention thus became the means of solving the problem of man vs. environment.

With the advent of civilized society and the breaking up of the old tribal organization, a series of classes appeared, each class that dominated society being brought to the front through some improvement in productive methods, and its existence depended upon the possession of certain things in society that other men, in order to live, were obliged to use—for example, the land was possessed by the nobles in feudal times, the land mines, factories and railroads by the capitalist to-day.

So, while man's productive power has so tremendously multiplied and he has bound the wind and water and made the fire and electricity obey him, we have the phenomenon of a large majority of the people still compelled to struggle with the bare problem that confronted the early savage—how to obtain food, clothing and shelter. At the same time the accumulated treasures of the intellect, of science, of art, have become to a large extent the possession of the few. All this is owing to the struggle of economic classes, the existence of which Marx was the first to point out.

The defender of the economic view of society is frequently charged with stirring up class antagonisms. To point out an existing fact, a truth, is never wrong. That classes exist few would deny. That the best way to remove them is by a candid recognition of their existence and the removal of their cause, seems self-evident.

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