

# The Economic Basis of Politics

(Continued from last issue)

Conclusion of Chap. 2, C. A. Beard's Economic Basis of Politics.

IT was not thought necessary, however, that each order should be represented only by members of the group. In medieval practice, on the contrary, clerks, nobles, curates and canons were sometimes chosen to represent townsmen. Often laymen were selected to speak for the clergy. Again, we see farmers (roturiers) and clergy standing as the spokesmen for men of noble order. Again it happened, perhaps to save expense, that the same deputies represented clergy, nobility, and third estate. Whatever the process of selection, however, each class acted separately and developed a certain consciousness of identical interest. When, in 1543, the king sought to unite the three groups in a common election, he found that instead of mitigating the group conflicts he only sharpened them. In a little while he restored the old practice of separate elections.

The French Estates General continued to meet from time to time until 1614, when the last grand session previous to the eve of the Revolution was held. At this memorable meeting there broke out a conflict between the nobility and the third estate which foreshadowed the struggle that was destined, more than one hundred and fifty years later, to destroy the whole system. The violence of this session and perhaps the conflict then raging in England between the Parliament and James I, served as a warning that the monarch should beware of nourishing a dangerous hostility among the national estates.

Whatever may have been the cause—with that we are not now concerned—no session of the Estates General was again called until 1788. In that year the king, being in desperate financial straits, once more summoned the representatives of the different economic groups that could give him relief, to consider the state of the realm. Immediately the antiquarians busied themselves with historical researches in order to restore the ancient and honorable institution in its old form.

To the Estates General of 1789, each estate—clergy, nobility, and third estate—sent its members and representatives. Then arose, as every one knows, a fateful struggle for power. The clergy and nobility, bent on preserving their dominion, insisted that the vote on measures should be taken by the houses, as three distinct orders. Thus they hoped to prevent the upper classes from being overwhelmed by the numerical majority of the third estate, which had twice as many representatives in the assembly as the other two estates combined. Every school history tells us of the deadlock which ensued, of Mirabeau's eloquence, of the Tennis Court Oath, and of the National Assembly which, by firm action, was substituted for the old three-class system. Had the clergy and the nobility been willing earlier to surrender some of their privileges, and concede to the third estate a fair portion of political power, the history of the desperate years that followed the peaceful revolution of 1789 might have been far different. By resisting to the breaking point, the clergy and the nobility were conquered and almost destroyed by the third estate.

Less significant for the history of the world, but by no means less interesting in itself, is the parliamentary development of Sweden. From very early times the constitution of that kingdom recognized and provided for the representation of four distinct classes, clergy, nobility, burghers and peasants. In the constitutional reorganization which followed the disturbances of the French Revolution and the Revolutionary Wars, this system was kept intact. Each class was not only distinctly represented, but each class had a house of its own through which the interests of the group were expressed in the government. The great landlords appeared in person. The spiritual house included the bishops and a number of other persons chosen by the clergy, the universities, and the academy of sciences, respectively.

The representatives of the middle class were elected by the properly qualified burghers of the towns and the mine owners. The representatives of the peasants were chosen by the landowning farmers and certain other members of the soil-tilling population. Each of the four houses of parliament deliberated alone and acted in the name of and for the class which it represented. Ingenious provisions were devised for obviating deadlocks. This four-class parliament was retained until 1866 when two houses took its place.

The principle of class representation, which had been adopted in the development of mediaeval governments, was taken over entirely by Austria in her constitutional reconstruction shortly after the middle of the nineteenth century. The Austrian upper house consisted, of course, of the nobility, whose economic foundation was the land. In the formation of the lower house, in 1860-1, representation was distributed among the several provinces of the realm and it was provided that the quota to which each province was entitled should be selected by the local legislatures from definite economic groups.

It was stipulated that the total number of deputies to be chosen should be distributed among four distinct "estates," namely, (1) the great landlords (except in Trieste and Vorarlberg where no such class existed, and in Dalmatia where the highest taxpayers were put into this group), (2) the burghers of the cities, markets and industrial places, (3) the peasants of the rural communes, and (4) the chambers of commerce. In 1873 indirect election was abandoned for direct election by popular vote, but the system of class representation remained intact. Twenty-three years later, that is, in 1896, the non-taxpayers and industrial proletariat were admitted to a share in the government. It was provided that seventy-two deputies, now added to the parliament, should be chosen by the voters in general, including those already members of other classes. This system of group representation remained in force until 1907 when manhood suffrage was adopted.

In formulating a constitution after the Revolution of 1848, the King of Prussia deliberately founded his government upon a class system, as you all know from your study of comparative politics. The voters of Prussia are divided into three classes: those who pay one-third of the income taxes elect indirectly one-third of the delegates to the Prussian Diet; those who pay a second third of the income taxes likewise elect a third of the delegates; and finally, all the rest of the voters, who constitute almost the entire electorate, choose the remaining third of the deputies. Thus the Prussian Parliament is made up of a House of Lords, representing the landed interests, and a House of Commons or Diet, representing in two-thirds of its membership the wealth of the kingdom, and in one-third the propertyless. Years of agitation and a threatened revolt on the part of the masses have failed to shake the foundations of this strongly knit system of class government.

All this, you may think, is interesting enough, but without bearing upon American conditions. It may be said that whatever were the practices of mediaeval France, England, Sweden, and Aragon, they have no meaning for the United States founded upon another dispensation. There stands the Declaration of Independence with its immortal statement that all men are born free and equal and that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. Here is what seems to be a repudiation of the whole notion of class or group interest in the process of government; but when we turn from theory to fact we find ourselves in the midst of mediaeval forms and institutions.

An examination of the first American state constitutions reveals no abandonment of the Old-World notion that government rests upon property. Take, for instance, the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780

drawn by John Adams and adopted after long and serious deliberation. In this document we discover that no man could vote for members of the legislature or for governor, unless he had a freehold estate of the annual value of three pounds, or some estate of the value of sixty pounds. Here is a distinct recognition of two classes of property interests in the government,—real property and personalty. To add further security to the two orders or "estates" the constitution provided that no one could be elected governor who did not possess a freehold of the value of one thousand pounds and furthermore, that the senators should be distributed among the respective districts of the state on the score of the amount of taxes paid in each of them. It was in defence of this last provision that Daniel Webster made his famous speech in the Massachusetts convention of 1820, defending the economic basis of government. If the Massachusetts constitution proved to be rather democratic in its operations, that was, as Webster pointed out, due to the wide distribution of property, not to any desire of the Massachusetts Fathers to sacrifice the security of property to a political shibboleth.

If we take a great middle state like New York, we find that the constitution drafted in 1777 distinctly recognized the existence of classes by establishing the predominance of the farmers. It provided that the senate should be composed of freeholders, and that none but freeholders possessing one hundred pounds worth of land could vote for the senators or for governor. A slighter property qualification was placed upon voters for the lower house—a qualification which admitted freemen of the incorporated towns, renters, and a few others, but kept out the lower levels of the proletariat. This class system remained in vogue until 1821. It was abolished then only against the violent protests of many intellectual leaders of the time, such as Chancellor Kent, who maintained that the rights of property could be protected only when property was frankly represented in the government, and that those "without a stake in the country" should have no voice in its politics.

The Fathers of the South did not differ from those of the North. In the agricultural state of Virginia, where there were few merchants and capitalists, the predominance which the landed classes possessed in fact was also established in right. Only freeholders could vote in that state under the constitution of 1776, and this restriction was kept in force for more than half a century. When a vigorous but vain attempt was made, in the constitutional convention of 1829, to abolish it, the freehold suffrage was defended on the ground that the landed group was the only secure foundation for government because all other classes were variable and transitory in character, while the possession of land furnished the strongest evidence of permanent, common interest with, and attachment to, the community.

Admitting the plain evidence of the first state constitutions, that the wise founders of this Republic recognized the place of property interests in political processes, it may be said that the Constitution of the United States, drawn in that period, nowhere takes into account the existence of economic divisions. This is true, if we read merely the language of the instrument and not the records of the convention which drafted it. In the document itself there are no provisions similar to those which appear in the first state constitutions, placing landed and personal-property qualifications on the suffrage and office holding; but the omission was not made because the framers of that immortal instrument were indifferent to the rights of property or unaware of the influence wielded by economic groups upon the course of government. Neither was it because they disapproved of property qualifications for such existed in nearly every state in the Union. In fact property qualifications for

(Continued on page 8)