

Materialist Conception of History

FOR BEGINNERS

LESSON No. 8.

THE first who came nearest to writing history from the materialistic standpoint was Buckle, in his "History of Civilization in England." Buckle says: "We shall thus be led to one vast question, which indeed lies at the root of the whole subject, and is simply this: Are the social actions of men, and therefor of societies, governed by fixed laws, or are they the result of either chance or supernatural interference?" "Fortunately," he says, "the believer in a possible science of history is not called upon to hold, either the doctrine of predestined events or that of the freedom of the will, and the only positions I will expect him to concede are the following. That when we perform an action, we perform it in consequence of some motive or motives, that those motives are the results of some antecedents, and that therefore, if we were acquainted with all the laws of their movements, we could with unerring certainty predict the whole of their immediate results. This, unless I am mistaken, is the view which must be held by every man whose mind is unbiassed by system, and who forms his opinions according to the evidence exactly before him. If, for example, I am intimately acquainted with the character of a person, I can frequently tell how he will act under given circumstances. Should I fail in my prediction, I must ascribe my error, not to the arbitrary and capricious freedom of his will, nor to any supernatural pre-arrangement, for of neither of these things have we the slightest proof, but must be content to suppose, either that I had been misinformed as to some of the circumstances in which he was placed, or else that I had not sufficiently studied the ordinary operation of his mind. If, however, I was capable of correct reasoning, and if at the same time I had complete knowledge of his disposition and of all the events of which he was surrounded, I should be able to foresee the line of conduct which in consequence of those events he would adopt."

Most people unconsciously admit this to be correct when criticising the conduct of other people by saying: "You would have done likewise under the same circumstances," or "put yourself in his place and what would you have done?"

When Buckle enters into the problems of ascertaining the methods of discovering the laws upon which human action is based, he concludes that their existence is proven by the regularity of recurrence, and then turns to statistics to prove their regularity.

He then proceeds to say what those laws are. "If we enquire what those physical agents are by which the human race is most powerfully influenced, we shall find that they may be classed under four heads, namely, climate, food, soil and the general aspects of nature, by which last, I mean, those presented chiefly to the sight, have, through the medium of that or other senses, directed the association of ideas, and hence in different countries have given rise to different habits of national thought."

Buckle is the first historian to show that ideas are not the original motive power in history, but that thought and ideas are themselves an effect, and not a primary cause. According to Buckle, they are the product of natural surroundings. Buckle writes history on the theory that the human mind is not the free agency it was thought to be, but that it is directed by external forces. So far the modern sociologists agree with him, but as to what these forces are they do not agree with him. For, while it is quite possible to explain upon this theory the differences between the characteristics, customs, and institutions of different countries, the theory is and must be insufficient to explain the changes in one and the same country where natural surroundings always remain the same. The Marxian theory is, that the mode and manner of obtaining food, clothing and shelter or, in other words, the mode of production, distribution and exchange, is the directive force in the history of man and the most powerful influence in creating and shaping our social institutions.

Great as was the influence of nature on primitive man, yet in the course of civilization, social influence

gradually grew to greater weight and importance, and man is much more actuated by motives of society than of nature. At the same time, subsistence always remains a matter of prime necessity. While Buckle failed to see the economic factor, we will benefit by following his theory a little longer, as he explains quite a lot which may be overlooked. I pointed out that Buckle tried to discover the laws of human action by their law of regularity and he goes on to illustrate the uniformity of the number of various crimes from year to year, and the amount of letters left in the post offices of London and Paris through the forgetfulness of addressing them. Another point which interests us is the number of marriages which he says is regulated by the price of food and wages. He fails to discover the cause of the uniformity of all the crimes and unaddressed letters but says, in regard to marriages: "In England the experiences of a century have shown, that marriages instead of having any connection with personal feelings, that this immense social and religious institution is not only swayed, but is completely controlled, by the rate of wages and the price of food." "The relation that subsists between the price of food and the number of marriages is not confined to England. The returns of France bear out the same view."

Buckle also points out that the marriage registrar returns is a sure barometer, indicating very precisely the years of prosperity and depression of a country's trade and commerce. I think we will agree, Buckle came pretty near discovering the economic factor especially dealing with marriages.

When we come to Buckle's analysis of the influence of nature's physical laws, he points the effects that climate, food and soil had on primitive man, and how the various civilizations have arisen in the different parts of the world. He says: "Of all the results which are produced among people by their climate, soil and food, the accumulation of wealth, in many respects is most important. For although the progress of knowledge accelerates the increase of wealth, it is nevertheless certain, that in the first formation of society, the wealth must accumulate before the knowledge begins." "As long as every man is engaged in collecting his own means of subsistence there will be neither leisure or taste to follow higher pursuits. In a state of society like this, there is no wealth, and without wealth, no leisure, without leisure there can be no knowledge. Thus it is that of all the social improvements, the accumulation of wealth must be the first, because without it there can be no leisure for the acquisition of knowledge and this depends on the fertility of the soil and natural environment."

We Socialists agree with the statement, but as Gabriel Deville has said: "Man, like all living beings, is the product of his environment, but while animals are affected only by the natural environment, man's brain, itself a product of the natural environment, becomes a cause, a creation, and makes for man an economic environment, so that man is acted on by two environments, the natural environment which has made man, and the economic environment, which man has made. Now in the early stages of human development, it is the natural environment, the fertility of the soil, the abundance of fish and game which is all important, but, with the progress of civilization, the natural environment loses in relative importance and the economic environment, machinery, factories and improved appliances, grows in importance until in our day the economic environment is well nigh all important. Hence the inadequacy of the Henry George theory, which places all its stress on one element of the natural environment, land, and wholly neglects the dominant economic environment. But while this economic environment, the dominant factor in human life, is the child of the brain of man, man in its creation has been forced to work within strict limitations. He had to make it out of the materials furnished him by the natural environment, and later by the natural environment and the inherited economic environment, so that in the last analysis the material and economic factor are supreme."

Deville goes on to say that we do not neglect the intellectual factors as we are accused, but refuse to waste our revolutionary energy on them when we see the decisive, dominant factor, the economic factor.

Loria, the Italian Socialist, says: "Geographical sociologists endeavor to explain society from the standpoint of the physical environment. Racial peculiarities may perhaps be accounted for on these grounds, and there can be no doubt, that only social development is strictly determined by geographical factors, or that the variations of different communities are largely the result of differences in environmental conditions, but modern society is far removed in time, and acquired attainments from purely physical nature, and it is impossible any longer to refer historical phenomena directly to geographical antecedents."

Buckle claims that regular employment and energy depends on the influence of climate. He draws attention to people living in a very northern climate, not so energetic or regular in habits as people of a temperate region. The very cold north, and at some seasons the deficiency of daylight, render it impossible for the people to continue their work out of doors; the people were more prone to desultory habits, with a national character more capricious, than that possessed by a people living in a temperate zone, whose climate permits the regular exercise of their ordinary industry. He says: "It would be difficult to conceive a greater difference in government, laws and religion than that of Norway and Sweden on the one hand, and Spain and Portugal on the other, but these four countries have one thing in common. In all of them continued agriculture is interrupted by the dryness of the soil, by the heat, while the same effect prevails by the severity of the cold and shortness of days in the north. The consequence is, that these four nations, while different in many respects, are all remarkable for a certain instability and fickleness of character, presenting a striking contrast to the more regular and stable habits which are established in countries whose climate subjects the working classes to fewer interruptions and forces on them a more constant and unremitting employment. These are the great physical causes by which the production of wealth is governed. For there is no instance in history of any country being civilized by its own efforts unless it possessed one of these conditions in a very favorable form. In Asia, civilization has always been confined to that vast tract of soil where its richness has secured to man that wealth without which no intellectual knowledge or progress can begin."

Buckle shows the vast belt of land extends from eastern China to the western coast of Asia Minor and Palestine. To the north of this was barren land, whose people never made any progress, and who, as long as they remained on this land never merged out of their uncivilized state. "How entirely," he says, "does this depend on the physical nature of their country from the fact that these Mongolians and the Tartarian hordes founded the great monarchies of China, India and Persia and have on all occasions attained civilization in nowise inferior to those possessed by the most flourishing of ancient kingdoms. The fertile plains of nature supplied the material wealth and, there it was, these barbarous tribes acquired for the first time some degree of refinement and produced a national literature. The Arabs in their own country, owing to its physical conditions, were a rude uncultured people, for, as in all others, great ignorance is the fruit of great poverty. But in the 7th century they conquered Persia, and the best part of Spain, and in the 9th century conquered the Punjab, and eventually nearly all India. They were, in their own country, roving savages, were now able to accumulate wealth, became founders of mighty empires, building schools and cities and collected libraries, traces of their power is still seen in Baghdad and Delhi."

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