

Political Representation

(Continued from last issue)

"It is an axiom of political economy that all true political representation must be, and can only be based on definite economic interests."—(Marx)

First installment of Chapter 2, Prof. Chas. A. Beard's "Economic Basis of Politics."

ECONOMIC GROUPS AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE STATE.

HAVING surveyed the theories of our six political philosophers, it is fitting and proper that we should inquire whether there has been in fact a close relation between the structure of the state and the economic composition of society. It would be interesting, if time permitted, to examine the constitution of Athens and to consider such matters as Draco's legislation and Solon's reforms or to analyse the illuminating pages in which Polybius describes the balance of powers in Rome. The result of such a study, pondered in connection with the theories we have just reviewed, could not fail to set in train a fascinating line of speculation. There are, however, limits to this undertaking, and we must confine our scrutiny to the modern state in its historical growth.

In reviewing the history of government in Western Europe, from the disintegration of the Roman Empire to the opening years of the nineteenth century, we discover that wherever the simple sword-won despotism of the war leader, prince or king, is supplemented or superseded by some form of representation, it is not the people, considered as abstract equal personalities, who are represented, but it is propertied groups, estates. We are told by that profound student of mediæval law, Dr. Stubbs, that the ideal toward which Europe was slowly working in the middle ages, was a constitution under which each class was admitted to a share of power and control, and national action determined by the balance of forces thus combined.

This was not, as he admits, a conscious design by which statesmen shaped their policies. Many forces and circumstances contributed to the making of the representative system of estates. Sometimes it was the resistance of a particular economic group to royal despotism that won for it a recognized share in the government. An example of this is afforded by the contest which ended in the grant of Magna Carta. The barons wrote their interest into the public law of England, and secured it by obtaining the right of actual participation as a class in the control of government. At other times kings, especially during wars of conquest or defence, found themselves straitened for funds, and they called upon certain classes or groups of men to fill their treasury. Such, for instance, was the origin of the English House of Commons. To the continued financial necessity of English kings, particularly during the long war with France, was due the extraordinary development in the power of the English Parliament. Whatever the circumstances in each particular case, the striking fact is that we find all over mediæval Europe what Dr. Stubbs calls, National assemblies composed of properly arranged and organized classes."

If we examine the constitution of England in the middle ages we find, in fact whatever the theory, four estates: the clergy, the baronage, the landed gentry, and the burgesses. Of these, the first three were founded, in the main, upon landed property. The first or spiritual estate in the English constitution comprised the whole body of the clergy. The clergy were invited to form a part of Parliament for two reasons. Their spiritual power was great, and even the boldest kings did not dare defy them until the days of the mighty Henry VIII. But it is hardly to be doubted that it was as holders of property of immense value that the clergy came to a large share of the sovereign power. The bishops and the abbots, who were summoned to Parliament by name, were

tenants-in-chief of the crown; in other words, they were great landed barons. As such they sat in the House of Lords. The inferior clergy in England, unlike their French brethren, though duly summoned to take their place in the great council of the realm, refused to obey the summons and remained for centuries in a convocation of their own, voting taxes on their property independent of the Parliaments of the realm. Though the clerical order was thus divided, the high authorities of the church sitting in the House of Lords and the inferior clergy dealing with the crown directly, it was mainly as a body of landed proprietors that the spiritual estate shared in the government.

The second English estate was the lay baronage, the members of which sat by their own right in the House of Lords along with the spiritual peers from the clerical estate. It is not necessary to inquire here into the historical circumstances which resulted in drawing a line between the richer barons and the untitled landed gentry, nor into those vainly disputed points of law which have been raised in the search for the origin and exact nature of the property rights which entitled a peer to a seat in the upper house. Whatever the cause may have been, the fact clearly stands forth, as Dr. Stubbs says, that in the middle ages the great land owners, tenants-in-chief, or titled lords, who appeared in person at the Parliament, were separated by a broad line from the freeholders who were represented by the knights of the shire.

According to a custom consecrated by time, it is the fashion to speak of the House of Commons as representing a sort of third estate, the commonalty of the realm. A little antiquarian inquiry, however, shows that the term "commons" does not derive its meaning, as is often erroneously supposed, from any connection with "the common people." On the contrary it comes from the vague word *communitas* which was used in the middle ages to describe a political organism such as a county or chartered town. The House of Commons, therefore, was in reality the house of the *communitates*, composed of representatives of the gentry of the counties and the burgesses of the town considered as collective bodies with their respective geographical areas. Strictly speaking, we find in the lower house of Parliament the spokesmen of two estates: the smaller landowners and the burgesses. In the early stages of parliamentary evolution, the agents sent by the burgesses were even treated as a separate house or estate, although the way in which they voted on measures is obscure. Later they were combined with the gentry.

Real Basis of Political Representation.

It was one of the peculiarities of the English system that the Parliament was not constituted of three or four distinct orders. In France, as we shall see, there were three separate estates—clergy, nobility, and third estate. In Sweden there were four orders—clergy, nobility, burghers and peasants. In both of these countries each order formed a separate chamber and acted as a collective body. In England, on the other hand, there were only two chambers in the political system, unless we treat the separate convocation of the clergy as a part of the political organism. The House of Lords combined the great landed lay barons with the great landed clerical barons. The House of Commons included burgesses from the towns and representatives of the landed gentry below the baronial line. Still, it is quite apparent, in spite of these combinations that the English constitution of the middle ages was a group system, resting upon a foundation of economic classes.

The principles underlying this mediæval system of class representation have been entirely abandoned in England in favour of the theory of abstract individual equality. They were well understood by Harrington, Lock and Burke. Indeed the British constitution of mediæval origin remained substantially unchanged until 1832, when the first of the

great series of parliamentary Reform Bills was enacted. Although nearly half a century since the French Revolution let loose its flood of liberty and equality doctrines, English reformers, even in 1832, remained unmoved. They widened the suffrage, it is true, but what they did in effect was to enfranchise, by a set of ingenious qualifications, another "estate" which had grown up with the advance of industry and commerce, namely, a body of middle class manufacturers and shop keepers. In vain did the English Chartists talk of "one man one vote," and universal manhood suffrage.

When the next generation of English reformers "shot Niagara," in 1867, they merely enfranchised another "estate"—the working classes of the great industrial centres. And when again in 1884 a new addition was made to the British constitution, another "estate" was enfranchised, the agricultural labourers. At no point was the tax paying or property notion abandoned by the English in favour of the rule that a man should be allowed to vote simply because he is what Carlyle called "an unfeathered biped."

After the era of individualism set in it was more difficult to trace the line between economic groups than it had been in the middle ages, but whoever reads the debates over the great reform bills in England can see that statesmen, at each period, had in mind not abstract human equality, but what Dr. Stubbs characterized as a constitution in which each class of society should be admitted to a share of power and control. The significance of this story for the political future of England, in view of the changed position of women in industry, particularly since the outbreak of the Great War, can readily be seen by one who has eyes to see.

Everywhere in mediæval Europe, as in England, we find constitutions resting upon estates, assemblies representing various orders, classes, and conditions of men, except the rightless serf at the bottom of society. In the Cortes of Aragon sat the clergy, the great barons (*ricos hombres*), the minor barons or knights, and the burgesses of the towns. The old parliament of Scotland was composed of prelates, barons and the smaller townsmen. In the representative assemblies which sprang up in some German principalities and in Russia, the same idea of class representation prevailed.

In the economic foundations of her Constitution, mediæval France differed in no fundamental way from the neighboring countries. The history of the French estates, local and general, offers to the student of political science an abundance of group phenomena for analysis and interpretation. The records of more than three hundred years copiously illustrate the operation of the group process; an added and very significant interest is given to the study by the role of the Estates General on the eve of the great Revolution.

As early as 1212, Simon de Montfort called a parliament to which he summoned bishops, nobles, and distinguished bourgeois. A few years later, there was held at Beziers an assembly of three orders (*des trois ordres*) to give advice relative to provincial administrative organization. In 1254, by royal ordinance, the Seneschal Beaucaire was instructed to take council with the prelates, the barons, the knights, and the representatives of the towns (*hominibus bonarum villarum*).

The first Estates General, or National Parliament, was held in France in 1303. This was speedily followed by other parliaments. Speaking of the session of 1308, a chronicler said that the king wished to have the advice and consent of men "of every condition in the realm."

Like all early national assemblies, the French Estates General met only on the call of the king, and the methods of election depended naturally upon the terms of the royal orders. Complicated and varying practices were adopted at different

(Continued on page 4)