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History

DESPITE the fact that the history of the human race records many striking examples of retrogression in social development, of civilizations destroyed and of peoples fallen backward into barbarism—such examples are, in truth, more frequent and spectacular, as Veblen has somewhere pointed out, than of those where the life and culture of peoples have been saved from such a precarious institutional situation, such for instance, as now threatens the peoples of the modern capitalist world—yet, it is indisputable, viewing history as a whole, since the days of primitive man to the present, that there has resulted a progressive, if uneven, development. Whatever slowly evolving forces or sudden calamities may have operated to sweep civilizations out of existence, and their peoples out of leadership in progress, something at least of value, prior to the complete wreck of productive and cultural life, appears to have been passed over to or appropriated by other peoples, and so saved for the race as a whole.

The art of writing, for instance, survives though its inventors have passed out of the knowledge of men; the dial on our watches reminds us of Ancient Babylon, and the uses we make of algebra calls to mind a debt we owe to an Arab civilization long passed away. By means of the art of writing, the preservation of knowledge was made easier and its diffusion tremendously stimulated. The influence of this art is recognized as one of the factors featuring the beginning of civilization, and, in great degree, contributing to continuity and comparative rapidity of social progress. The slow development of pre-historic times, which practically synchronize with pre-writing times, may in part be ascribed to the lack of such a medium of preserving and diffusing knowledge; for, though should all material evidences of progress be destroyed in some calamity, yet, if knowledge is preserved the injury will not be irreparable.

Not the least of the benefits accruing from the art of writing is the preservation of past experiences of the race. This is true in spite of two extremes of opinion tending to degrade our estimation of the study of history, that of the ultra-constitutionalists, obsessed by historical precedents and that of those they have driven, in hysterics, to the extreme reaction of seeing no value in the study of history whatever.

History may be said to be the corporate memory retained by the human race of its experiences and to be as essential to methodical social progress and well-being as is memory to the individual. Reflection on these social experiences shows us the moving forces and changing material conditions which constitute the basis of historical movements and events, and which determine the nature of political, philosophical or religious ideologies, the modes of social and institutional development, and the successive forms of social organization. For the purpose of understanding present society and its problems we study the past out of which it grew organically and in which it still has roots. We study the phenomena of both past and present, not as things separated, finished and given, but as things in a cumulated sequence of cause and effect, interdependent and in ceaseless change, and, as such, impregnated with the germs of future life, with potentialities, tendencies, and the necessity of so-

cial adjustments whether for human weal or woe.

But history, as it has been and is written, must be read with discrimination. Consideration must be given to the historian's natural bias for or against a particular country or race, to his class connections, and to his political, religious and professional affiliations. Further to be considered is the period in which the historian lived or lives; for, just as there is a history of ideas, philosophical, religious, political, etc., so there is a history of the changing methods and purposes of presenting history, as for instance, during the interval that separates the Annalist of the ninth century, A.D., to the historian of the present day.

The great works of the classical literature of ancient Greece and Rome were lost to the world during the dark ages following upon the fall of Roman civilization. Out of social disorganization slowly and painfully emerged the feudal order; and out of a welter of ignorance and superstition as painfully and slowly emerged another dawn of intellectual light and learning. Intellectualism continued to extend its influence until it began to question the truth and threatened to destroy the influence of the superstitious concepts and absurd dogmas of organized Christianity. It was then that, in the fourteenth century, all the terrors of the "Holy Inquisition" were brought into play, and all free enquiry, discussion and the utterance of speculative ideas were suppressed: bigotry and intolerance, fire and fagot, rack and thumbscrew reigned supreme. The human mind had now to struggle against more than its own natural limitations along the road of intellectual enlightenment; it had also to free itself from the poisonous cloud-vapors of authoritarian dogma, accumulated during priest-ridden centuries and enforced by ruthless political power.

For a knowledge of Europe in the centuries following the fall of Rome on to the ninth century, we have to depend on the crude records of the Annalist, mostly monks, whose aim was to set down the disconnected events they narrated as simply marks of time to prevent the confusion of one year with another. But some progress in method began to appear with the lapse of time. The chronicler, who followed the Annalist, placed the mere distinction of time in subordination to the narrative of events, though he told them in mere order of succession without reference to their causes or relations in the present or the past.

A modern historian, John Richard Green, places the birth of historical presentation, in the modern sense of the term, in the twelfth century. Says he: "The growth of civilization brought reflection with it—still more as the recovery of the greater works of classical literature suggested larger views of man's social and political relations, and, at the same time, furnished models on which new thoughts which they suggested might frame themselves. . . . In a word history had begun, but it seemed to be born only to vanish away. . . . the space from the close of the thirteenth century to the Reformation is a mere blank in historical progress." Referring to the state of historical enquiry in England, he says: "But although a happy instinct taught the English scholars of the seventeenth century to select what really were the most important records of the past . . . no instinct could teach them the true principles on which the study of these records had to be based.

On the contrary they were led away by the theological spirit, which in every department of knowledge has been the bane of all true progress, and the wider questions of national or social life were subordinated to the miserable controversies of warring sects." Nevertheless, he points out, that the very controversies which blighted historical enquiry and method in England were the means of giving birth to its development on the continent. The Jesuits, were, strangely enough, unconscious midwives when they instituted the compilation of the lives of the saints in order to "overawe the Protestant world with a gigantic panorama of the life and effort and perpetuity of the church which it defied." The labors of this enterprise developed in certain of those engaged in it a more scientific spirit than had hitherto obtained, and their influence infused fresh life and vigor into historical research, and into the presentation of history.

What is said above touches as briefly as the writer was able on methods of presenting history. Of much more importance to the student, however, are the various theories upon which historians have attempted to base an explanation or interpretation of the movement and events of history. But this phase of our subject is too important to be dealt with in the space at disposal, and brief notice only must suffice.

There is little except antiquarian value in the theories of the Annalists and the Chroniclers. Their historic horizon was extremely narrow and they viewed the world as a complexity of things ready made. The pages of their annals and chronicles are cluttered with reports of supernatural intervention, beneficial and malevolent, into what were, after all, often little more than tribal affairs. Alongside those, as worthy of even less consideration, we must place a class of histories rampant down to our day. These are the familiar, vulgarizing "drum and trumpet" histories of our schools, which are cooked to inculcate national prejudice into the plastic minds of the young. It is chiefly by means of these "histories" that the extreme forms of the "great man" theory of history are fostered.

Of higher interest to the student of history and of sociology in general, are the two modern conflicting theories of history, the Idealistic and the Materialistic conceptions.

For the former conception it may be said that those who hold it base their interpretation of history on a concept of the power and self-sufficiency of the idea, and, that thus, social progress and well-being are based upon man's better insight into supposed eternal truths and to an increase of his sense of justice. To them, history is a record of good and evil deeds, fundamentally a record of conflicts between the upper and the nether worlds of spirit and carnal desire.

In another part of this issue of the "Clarion" will be found Gabriele Deville's brief summary of the Marxian "Materialistic Conception of History," and of the interdependent theory that class struggles are the historical instruments of political progress. The reader is referred to the summary as an introduction to a study of that theory of history. Deville pays attention to the Anarchists, as a branch of the idealist school of historical thought, but also with them must be grouped all bourgeois schools of political conviction, including Liberals, Radicals, and also Socialists other than Marxian Socialists. C. S.