

Historical Review

TO some, the present system of society appears as the highest pinnacle of civilization to which man can ever aspire, the final word in liberty, democracy and justice; to others, it appears as the limit of hypocrisy, sordidness and brutality, the lowest depth to which man has fallen.

If we really want to understand capitalism, we will have to view it from a different angle; not one of ethics, nor of how near it has approached to a pre-determined plan or scheme. We will have to enquire into the conditions prevailing at the advent of capitalism; what alterations have been made, how much more man understands of natural forces, whether improvements have been made in methods of obtaining a living, and what are the tendencies of social evolution today. In other words, what has been the historic mission of capitalism.

A proper study cannot be made in the pages of the "Clarion," least of all in one short article, but we urge the reader to make use of the literature advertised elsewhere in this paper, wherein a much fuller and abler analysis is made; but we may be able to arouse the interest of someone to whom Socialism is new.

Feudal society rested upon land ownership and military prowess; production was mainly agricultural, and the workers were tied to the land, forbidden as a class to leave the manor or feudal domain upon which they were born. They had some land of their own upon which they worked to produce their needs, and in addition they were compelled to till the land for the requirements of their overlords, the feudal nobles, and their families. The food they ate was simple, but wholesome and plentiful at all times, except during such natural calamities as periods of famine, pestilence, etc., or perhaps during a war. They were certain of their living from day to day.

In the towns which arose, the making of necessary articles other than food products was carried on. The tools in use were simple, everything was made by hand,—it was a method which we know of as handicraft production. One individual owned all the tools necessary to his trade, and made an article from start to finish. If a carriage maker, for instance, he made body, wheels, seats, etc., and probably painted and finished everything completely. Owning the tools, he was the owner of the product of his labor. He worked by himself, or at the most, with one journeyman and one or two apprentices. The process was slow, but for quality of material, workmanship, and beauty of design, the goods of this period are not approached in modern times.

Life in general for the mass of feudal society, was simple. The horizon was limited to the doings in village or town, and its immediately surrounding country. It was a life of ignorance and superstition. A plague was construed as a visitation from God, and the remedy was prayer and fasting. The universe appeared peopled with devils and angels, fairies and witches.

The nobility had a somewhat wider field of activity. They carried on wars of plunder for the acquisition of more land. They had spices and fine raiments brought from the Orient, they engaged in statecraft, were wealthy and lived a life of splendor and comfort.

The clergy spent their times gathering tithes and doles, lived in considerable comfort and taught submission to the King and nobility, the Pontiff of Rome, and Holy Mother Church. The most influential of them had control of nearly all the education in such arts and sciences as existed. They also engaged quite considerably in statecraft and court intrigues.

There was in addition a class of merchant traders, which along with the serfs, as the workers under feudalism are called, are the classes most important for our present study. The traders took wool from England, finished cloth from Flanders, weapons from Spain, etc., and exchanged them for one

another or for spices, silks and luxuries from Eastern countries.

At first, they served the needs of feudalism quite well, and without clashing, but in time they amassed wealth and became important enough to desire a voice in the management of nations. They were harassed and oppressed by the nobility in control of the State. Taxes were levied upon them when their trading caravans passed through a feudal domain, and at times after taxes and tolls were paid, they were robbed of their merchandise. Duties were placed upon the goods brought in their ships. They needed the aid of science in their struggles to navigate the world, and the Roman Catholic Church placed a ban upon the development of science.

Getting their living by buying and selling, they needed cheap and plentiful production, and the craft guilds (organizations of master handicraftsmen) had laws limiting production and keeping quality at the highest pitch. All these irksome restrictions forced upon the merchant traders the need to obtain control of the political powers, to use them in their own interests, and after a struggle more or less protracted, they acquired the reins of government, and society became greatly altered. They set about abolishing kings and nobles, or limiting their power; saw that trade was unmolested, and overcame the opposition of the guilds by abolishing them or appropriating their lands and property.

The method and motive of production changed. Whereas, formerly the necessities of life were produced for use, only the surplus being exchanged, soon things were produced, not for use, but for sale, for the realization of profit.

In the place of the artisan, working by himself with his own tools and marketing the product, the merchant now supplied raw material to the worker and took the finished goods to the market.

In the course of time, the merchants gathered together the workers to the extent of fifty or a hundred under one roof, and supplied tools and raw materials, paying the worker only a wage; a price for his energy—his labor-power. The merchants became capitalists, exploiters of wage-labor. At first, only the old hand tools were used, but co-operation and division of labor were introduced. To go back to our illustration of the carriage maker, instead of an individual making the full carriage, the work was divided between wheel-makers, body-makers, painters, etc., the worker thereby losing his ability to produce a complete article.

With the ever-widening markets, consequent upon the discovery of the new world and of sea-routes to the Orient, arose the demand for still more wage-workers, and it was met by laws forcing freedom upon the serfs. Not only were they given freedom to leave the manor or feudal land, but their own plots of land were taken from them by legal or by open violence. They were made free from all property in the means of wealth production. Without land, without tools, they too were forced to sell the only thing they had to sell—their labor-power. Production had become organized entirely upon a commodity basis.

A stream of profits flowed into the coffers of the capitalists, while the workers suffered poverty and degradation. Instead of living upon the land, and receiving wholesome food, they wandered in rags up and down the country, begging a meal and selling their energy wherever they could. In place of work in the open fields, they were crowded into ill ventilated, poorly-lighted factories, for long hours of the day. At night, they crept into garret or cellar and slept fitfully amid dirt and vermin. So great became the greed for profit that men, women and even children of seven years of age were forced into factories and mines for twelve, fourteen and sixteen hours a day. Such was the realization by the workers of the promised "liberty," "equality," and "fraternity."

During the period under review, other things had transpired which appear in more favorable light,

Science had been freed from the shackles of the church, and great strides had been made. Instead of the narrow confines of feudal society, men now spread out to the Americas and round the coast of Africa to India. Instead of a comet being excommunicated as a demon—which actually occurred in the 12th century—the telescope was invented and man started to study the heavens scientifically and to formulate laws explaining the formation and movements of heavenly bodies.

Geologists examined the earth's crust, and found it to be millions of years old, instead of merely 6,000 years, as taught by the church. A powerful blow was struck at religious dogma when the Darwinian discoveries in the field of biology, showed that far from man being created perfect, he had painfully and slowly evolved from primitive, ape-like, animals.

The greatest discoveries and inventions were made in the tools of industry. The spinning wheel gave way to mechanical devices, such as the spinning-jenny and spinning-frame. The power-loom took the place of hand-weaving, and most important of all, the perfection of the steam engine by Watt in the middle of the 18th century. Previously, simple machinery had been run by means of wind and water, but the use of steam gave man a motor power that would work at all times and in well-nigh all places.

Since that time improvements in machinery and new discoveries and inventions have increased apace. We have had the discovery and use of electricity, telegraph and telephone systems, ocean cables, the automobile, and lately the airplane. All these increased the productive power of man to an enormous degree. Wealth has accumulated to an extent inconceivable in the Middle Ages, and only faintly realized today.

Did all these improvements lighten the labor of the workers? Not at all; everything produced belonged as always to the owners of the tools and machines, who were intent upon reaping profits, and the surplus instead of easing man's burdens, went for greater expansion and new markets were sought all over the globe. Whole races and even continents were subjected to capitalism. Instead of fights between petty principalities, war involved several countries in many parts of the world.

These huge undertakings, whether of war or of industry (such as the building of railways and steamships) could not be carried on by individuals, and so vast bodies of workers have to co-operate. Gigantic plants with modern machines cannot be owned by individuals, so joint stock companies, combines and trusts develop.

All this has still further increased the productivity of the worker, but he does not benefit by it, because as pointed out before, he does not own that which he produces. He receives in the form of wages just sufficient to keep him fit to work. Now that capitalism has spread all over the world, there are no more markets for the surplus produced; so that periodically we have industrial crises such as we see today, periods when the worker cannot sell his labor-power and faces starvation, or at best, bread-lines and soup kitchens, a little of the wealth he has made, doled out to him as charity. During so-called periods of prosperity he has to work long hours at intense speed, to live on adulterated food and dress in shoddy clothing. Green fields and natural beauty he sees perhaps once a year for a day or two; the rest of his time, when he is not working, is spent in the slum districts of cities. At work, he is largely reduced to the position of a mere machine-tender, and must suffer the sickening monotony of doing one or two simple operations hour after hour, day after day. Improvements in machinery and efficient systems tend to displace more and more workers, who compete with him for a job. In spite of his great productivity, he receives a far smaller percentage of his product than the workers of any other social system. His position grows steadily worse, while all the time he is harassed by thoughts of the uncertainty of his livelihood.

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