

# Materialist Conception of History

## FOR BEGINNERS

### LESSON III.

**T**O get to the subject proper, what do we mean by the Materialist Conception of History, or Economic Determination, as some express it? Let me try and make it plain, because there is cant in Socialism just as there is cant in religion.

Many of us are apt to use the phrases such as Materialistic Conception of History, Class Struggle, and Class Consciousness, with no more idea of their meaning than some of our religious friends who repeat theological phrases in poll-parrot fashion. When we talk intelligently of the Materialistic Conception of History, we mean what everywhere proves to be true, that the bread and butter question is the most important question in life. All the rest of the life of the individual is affected, if not dominated, by the way he obtains a living.

As this is true of individuals so also is it true of society, and this gives us the key to understand past history and, within limits, to predict the course of future development.

It is the study of the development of society and by society is meant all the people, with their facilities of getting a living, their institutions and ideas. It traces the way in which the races of men obtain their living and all other development depends upon the changes and improvements in the way of producing food, clothing and shelter of the human race. Our political, legal, moral and all other institutions have their roots in the economic soil. As one writer has said: "Our morals are not the roots but the fruits of civilization." Marx puts it thus:

"It is not man's consciousness that determines man's existence, but his social existence that determines his consciousness."

That is, all conception of good or bad, right or wrong, arises out of man's social relations with his kind, and the social relations are a result of the means whereby he procures his living.

To Buckle and others, progress of society was attributed to or appeared as a triumph of knowledge over superstition. To Spence, it appeared to consist essentially as the political power and social prestige from a class of warriors to a class of merchants, from militarism to industrialism. Each of these views has contributed a little to history, but to understand the causes of the change, it must be remembered that the production of wealth is a phenomenon more fundamental than science or religion, war and politics, and the vague generalizations must give way to economics. This view is expressed by Marx in his "Critique of Political Economy."

"In the social production which men carry on, they enter into definite relations which are indispensable and independent of the will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage in the development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which rise legal and political forms of social consciousness.

"The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life."

A moral code grows up in society and changes with the succeeding stages of society's growth. The moral code operates in favor of the ruling class, to whose interest it is to perpetuate our belief in the supernatural and to keep us ignorant of the true facts of historic growth.

Darwin says in his "Descent of Man":

"It is worthy of remark that a belief constantly inculcated during the early years of life while the brain is impressible appears to acquire the nature of an instinct, and the very essence of an instinct is, that it is followed independent of reason."

All human institutions having their roots in the economic soil makes reforms abortive, because they do not go to the roots of our economic structure.

The reform tinker who has no higher aim in politics than to mend passing pots we do not endorse. He shall pass through life mending pots and leave this world with more pots to mend than he found

when he started his mending. But anything which goes to the roots and modifies the economic structure will eventually modify every other branch and department of human life, political, ethical, legal and religious. This makes the social question an economic question. If this be true, some of you may ask why do Socialists, instead of using economic methods to solve an economic question, organize into a political party. To answer this question we must understand what the State is and what relation it holds to the economic question.

Gabriel Deville defines the State thus:

"The State is the public power of coercion created and maintained in human society by the division into classes, a power clothed with force, to make laws and levy taxes. As long as the economically dominant class retain full possession of the State or public power of coercion they are able to use it as a weapon to defeat every attempt to alter the economic structure of society, therefore every attempt to alter the economic structure of privilege and establish industrial democracy inevitably takes the form of a political struggle between the owning class and the exploited class."

Let us take the doctrine of the Materialistic Conception of History held by Marxians. Engels says, in the "Communist Manifesto."

"In every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained the political and intellectual history of that epoch."

Or take Chas. Vail in his "Scientific Socialism":

"The laws, customs, education, public opinion, and morals are controlled and shaped by the economic conditions, or in other words by the dominant ruling class which the economic system of any given period forces to the front. The ruling ideas of each age have been the ideas of its ruling class, whether that class was the patricians of ancient Rome, the feudal barons of the middle ages, or the capitalists of modern times. The economic structure largely controls and shapes all social institutions and also religions and philosophical ideas."

Take Marx himself:

"The mode of production obtaining in material life determines, generally speaking, the social, political and intellectual processes of life."

Ferri, the Italian, calls it economic determinism. Ferri points out that we must not forget the various other factors which, though they themselves are determined by the economic factor, in their turn become causes and work concurrently with the economic factor.

Loria, another Italian, states the doctrine in somewhat the same fashion. Gabriel Deville, the Frenchman, who has popularized the Marxian ideas in France, has pointed out the various other factors. He says:

"Man, like all living beings, is a product of his natural 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 creator, 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 that 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 one day the economic environment as well-nigh all important. Hence the inadequacy of the Henry George theory, which places all its strength on the element of the natural environment, land, and wholly neglects the dominant economic factor.

"But while the economic factor is the child of the brain of man, man in its creation has been forced to work within strict limitations.

"He had to make things out of the materials furnished him by the natural environment, and later by the natural environment plus the inherited economic environment, so that in the

last analysis the material and economic factors are supreme. We Marxians are often accused of neglecting the intellectual factor and other factors, but we do not forget them. We recognize their existence but refuse to waste our energy on them when we plainly see the decisive, dominant factor, the economic factor."

As Deville says: "We do not neglect the cart because we insist in putting it behind the horse instead of in front or alongside, as our critics would have us do."

Our next lesson will begin from primitive man upwards towards civilization, accomplished by the improved methods of procuring food, clothing and shelter.

PETER T. LECKIE.

### ARMENIA AND U. S.

Our country has suffered more during the past war than Armenia. Due to religious and racial prejudices, hundreds of thousands of Armenians were massacred by the Kurds, semi-savage tribes of Asia Minor. Christian Germany did not endeavor to stop these massacres. Patriotic Germans maintained that the Armenians were pro-Ally, and therefore deserved to be massacred. As soon as Germany capitulated, the U. S. was asked to assume a mandate over Armenia. America was the saviour of humanity. Why not take helpless Armenia under her protection? President Wilson gratefully accepted this kind offer and asked Republican Congress to vote him money and men for that purpose. Why men? You see quite a large number of Armenians objected to this mandate. They made quite a fuss about the fourteen points. They believed in the self-determination of small nations. So it was necessary to use a little persuasion in the form of bullets. The Republican Party immediately opposed this move. It contended that it would require over 100,000 men to pacify Armenia. So there you have it. The question of a mandate over Armenia is assuming national proportions. It is one of the issues of the present political campaign.

Why is it that there is so much discussion over this mandate? No one grumbled when England took over Mesopotamia, or France Syria. The Republican Party represents the industrial capitalists—the manufacturers of America. These men want a strangle hold on the world markets. They are essentially anti-British. The Chicago "Tribune," one of their chief organs, is one of the most extreme anti-British dailies in this country. They are opposed to the League of Nations, not because of its nature, but because England has six votes to America's one. They want a mandate over Mexico or Mesopotamia but Armenia never. They want oil wells and coal. They want to exploit the natural resources of a country. Armenia as far as they are concerned is worthless; Armenia does not contain any oil wells nor has it any iron or coal of importance.

The Democrats on the other hand represent the bankers and financiers. These men have loaned England and other European countries fabulous sums. They desire to see Europe rehabilitated. Their interests and British interests are identical. They are pro-British. The N. Y. "Times," an extremely pro-British daily, is one of their chief organs. Armenia is the bridge between Russia and Mesopotamia. Russia is Bolshevik. She must not be permitted to come in contact with Turkey so as to endanger British interests. And again, England is not interested in Armenia so far as the exploitation of natural resources is concerned. She would be willing to sacrifice the lives of British workingmen for the maintenance of order in India or in some other country rich in natural resources.

Although not the chief issue of the present political campaign, it serves to show that the capitalist class does not present a united front to all questions. It also shows that the humanitarian aims of the allies have an economic background.

JOHN TYLER.