

# Materialist Conception of History

## FOR BEGINNERS

### Lesson 17.

#### "FRENCH REVOLUTION."

IN Weir's "Historical Basis of Modern Europe," (p. 105), he says: "It cannot be too often repeated that the French Revolution was not a convulsive struggle of a people tortured beyond endurance, but the collapse of an effete social system. Though the Lord of the Manor no longer resided amongst the peasants, they had to pay toll at his bridges, tolerate the ravages of his pigeons and game, bring their corn to his mill and grapes to his wine press, and dough to his ovens; nor could they escape the requisition of the church."

F. A. M. Mignet, in his "French Revolution," says, (p. 77): "The insurrection broke out in a violent and invincible manner. A young girl entering a guardhouse, seized a drum and rushed through the streets beating it, and crying 'Bread, Bread.' She was surrounded by a crowd of women. This mob advanced toward the Hotel de Ville, increasing as it went . . . broke open the doors, seized weapons and marched towards Versailles. The people rose en masse, the national guard and French guards joining against the opposition of their commander, Lafayette." On page 88, 89, 91, Mignet records that when Talleyrand proposed to the clergy to renounce ecclesiastical property to the nation after the debate on this subject, the clergy rose against the proposition. And when this property was placed at the nation's disposal by the decree of 2nd December, 1789, the hatred of the clergy to the Revolution broke out from that moment. Page 90: "When the clergy saw the decree of the 29th December transferring the administration of the church property to the municipalities, it sought every means of impeding the operations of the municipalities by exciting as much as possible religious questions, and it raised the Catholics against the Protestants for the purpose of compromising the assembly and confounding the cause of its own interests with that of religion. When the Assembly completed the reorganization of France, the nobility emigrated to excite Europe against the Revolution. The clergy, discontented with the loss of its possessions, still more than with the ecclesiastical constitution, sought to destroy the new order by insurrections. These two elements prepared the elements of civil and foreign wars." (p. 109.)

De Gibbin says: "The French Revolution was the result of economic causes that had been operating for centuries, and which had their effect 400 years before in the Peasants' Revolt in England. These economic effects have been kept in the background by historians, blinded by the increased wealth of the richer portion of the nation, ignoring the fact that it was accomplished by serious poverty among the industrial classes. Nor did historians perceive the famous world wars in which England was engaged at the close of the century and up to 1815 were necessitated by England's endeavor to obtain the commercial supremacy of the world, after she had invented the means of supplying the world's markets to overflowing. Economic causes were at the root of them all." Another historian tells us: "Prior to 1789, three-fifths of all the best land and improvements and three-quarters of all the wealth of the nation belonged to 500,000 clergy, nobility and royalty, while the other 25,000,000 owned two-fifths lands and one-fourth property, paying all taxes as the above three parties were all exempted from taxation; the people confiscated all this wealth, selling it and putting the money in the treasury." The same conditions obtained in Mexico and the South American provinces of Spain. The clergy, nobles and religious orders owned the most fertile land, and Mexico followed the method of France when they became a republic, by confiscating all the property of these classes and divorcing the church from the State."

The "Communist Manifesto" by Marx and Engels

says: "All property relations in the past have continually been subject to historical change consequent upon change in historical conditions. The French Revolution, for example, abolished feudal property in favor of bourgeois property." The Revolution was welcomed in England until it appeared it was going to affect the English nobility. Burke said the overthrow of kingship in France would lead to the same in England. The World Peace Foundation (Feb. 1919) in a booklet on Anglo-American relations, dealing with the French Revolution period says: "Britain went to war to check the expansion of the French Revolution to other countries, and especially to prevent the spread of revolutionary democracy on her own soil." This led to the Napoleon wars. Napoleon passed the decree of Berlin after a victorious struggle with Russia and Prussia, declaring a blockade and the seizure of all British ships and exports, and all the ships of other nations if they called at a British port, because Britain declared a blockade of the whole coast of France and her allies from Dantz to Trieste. It was impossible to enforce this blockade even by the immense force at Britain's disposal. Napoleon retaliated by the exclusion of all British trade to and from the Continent. Britain saw this might ruin her trade and issued an order in council, January, 1807, by which neutral vessels voyaging to coasts subject to the blockade were compelled to touch a British port on pain of seizure. The order in council brought on the war with the United States, as they opposed Britain's right of search on her ships.

Engels in his "Socialism, Utopian and Scientific," says: "The great French Revolution was the third uprising of the bourgeoisie, but the first that had entirely cast off the religious cloak and was fought out on undisguised political lines; it was the first, too, that was really fought out to the destruction of one of the combatants, the aristocracy, and the complete triumph of the other, the bourgeoisie. In England the continuity of the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary institutions, and the compromise between the landlord and the capitalist, found its expression in the continuity of judicial procedure and in the religious preservation of the feudal forms of the law. In France the Revolution constituted a complete breach with the traditions of the past; it cleared out the very last vestige of feudalism; and created in the Code Civil a masterly adaption of the old Roman law—that almost perfect expression of the juridical relations corresponding to the economic stage called by Marx the production of commodities—to modern capitalistic conditions; so masterly that this French revolutionary code still serves as a model for reforms of the law of property in all other countries, not excepting England." (p. 23, Whitehead Library). On p. 43: "The Revolution was the victory of the third estate, i.e., of the great masses of the nation working in production and in trade, over the privileged idle classes, the nobles and the priests. But the victory of the third estate soon revealed itself as exclusively the victory of a small part of this 'estate' as the conquest of political power by the socially privileged section of it, i.e., the propertied bourgeoisie. And the bourgeoisie had certainly developed rapidly during the Revolution, partly by speculation in the lands of the nobility and of the church, confiscated and afterwards put up for sale, and partly by frauds upon the nation by the means of army contracts. It was the domination of these swindlers that, under the Directorate, brought France to the verge of ruin, and thus gave Napoleon the pretext for his coup d'etat."

When Russia signed a peace treaty with Napoleon, Russia forced Sweden to renounce her treaty with England, and Napoleon had the Russian and Swedish fleets at his disposal. England, afraid that Napoleon might force the Danish fleet on his side, took no chances, and the English fleet sailed for Copenhagen and defeated the Danish fleet and took this advantage without even a declaration of war. It was at this time when France defeated Holland,

England took the Dutch colonies, Cape of Good Hope, Ceylon and Malacca.

The Revolution had so many different characteristics in the various countries that historians in general regard political events of certain epochs as the outcome of the will of the sovereigns. They seem to forget that a man is only a king because other men consent to the arrangement, and this consent is based upon the fact that the sovereign exercises his political power in accord with the economic interests of the dominant class. When we analyze the political commotions in Germany at the time of the Reformation, the English Revolution of 1688, and the French Revolution of 1789, they all constitute the transformation of power to the capitalist class. Historians overlook the essential difference existing in these three events. In Germany, capital found itself in a position of hopeless inferiority against feudal property and, having to rely on its own resources in the contest against feudalism, it attained incomplete success. In England, the capitalist only acquired great wealth and soon succeeded in limiting the powers of the feudal nobility as we saw by the provisions in the "Magna Charta," thus by the time they decided to possess themselves of political power they found themselves confronted with a weak adversary, and were thus able to gain the victory over feudalism alone, without invoking the aid of the people. Hence nobles and capitalists formed the principal figure in the drama of the English Revolution, while the people remained uninterested spectators. In France on the other hand the bourgeoisie never obtained wealth and power to restrain the excesses of the nobles. The nobles opposed a vigorous resistance to the political demands of the bourgeoisie and the latter found themselves compelled to seek an alliance with the people. Therefore these conditions presented different characteristics. As Loria has illustrated, the bourgeoisie in Germany after the Reformation needed the help of the laboring people to defeat the nobility, but they had not the courage to seek an alliance or accept it when the chance arose. The Peasants' Revolt was a rebellion against tyrannical conditions of centuries, against the feudal nobility. It was urged on by an impoverished clergy eager for vengeance, and burned the lords' castles, swearing that only the house of the laborer should be seen on earth. During this revolt some of the towns offered unlooked for assistance to these political uprisings, and made common cause with the peasants. The town of Strasburg received rebels as citizens. Ulm provided the peasants with money, Nuremberg supplied them with provisions. A learned man named Conrad Mutian declared that the revolt proceeded more from the towns than the country, and for a time it appeared like a joint attack on feudalism. But the capitalists withdrew their support and discarded the peasants and made an alliance with the enemy; as we saw, Luther the pontiff of the capitalist class condemned the rebellion. Thus the capitalist class saw the political power they had been on the eve of possessing remaining a special privilege for several more centuries in the hands of the feudal class, although it continued to be modified and adapted to new times. The thirty years' war contributed to hastening the dissolution of feudalism, rendering the antiquated economic system more acute, and the Napoleon wars compelled Prussia to abolish the last vestiges of feudalism by freeing the peasants, as free labor is necessary for capitalistic development. In 1748 the capitalists of Austria, finding themselves oppressed while landholders predominated, did not hesitate to solicit the King of Prussia to dethrone the German Princes and conquer Austria with the hope of obtaining political supremacy in the new state.

The bourgeoisie insurrection against the nobility in England had a more glorious outcome. At the time of Henry I., the English bourgeoisie was powerful. (Continued on page 7)