

Lewis Henry Morgan, Author of "Ancient Society"

An Account and Appreciation of His Life Work.

(Concluded)

The Discovery of Gens

The second part of "Ancient Society" contains the fruits of those researches of Morgan's which it is generally recognized constitute his greatest contribution to sociology. Prior to its appearance there existed little or no exact knowledge of the tribal organizations of primitive peoples.

In his *League of the Iroquois* and even later works, Morgan himself had adhered to the commonly accepted view that the Mohawks, Senecas, etc., were each nations in many ways equivalent to modern national communities. The smaller groups within these "nations," each of which was called after a certain animal which was its totem, Morgan had designated "tribes." Subsequent investigation, however, convinced him that the larger groups, the, the Senecas, etc., were the true tribes, and that they were different from the nation which only came into existence after the coalescence of several such tribes, and fundamentally so from the modern territorial nation, in which kinship as a social tie is eliminated.

But the most important fact was that the basic and unitary organization of the Indians was the smaller group, that which he had earlier called the "tribe." This "clan" or "totem group" he soon recognized, as his researches expanded, to be an all but universal institution among savage and barbarian peoples. Everywhere it consisted of a group of blood relatives descended, or claiming descent, from a common ancestor. Its members were strictly bound not to intermarry, but to mate outside the group; they elected and deposed their own chiefs, and met together in common council.

Then Morgan made a remarkable discovery. Even the most learned and acute historians up to his time had been greatly puzzled over an institution which existed among the ancient Greeks and was known to the classical Latin writers by the name of "Gens." Being unable to understand its structure or function, Grote and other historians erroneously considered the gens to be an extension and outgrowth of the monogamous family. Morgan, however, showed convincingly in his "Ancient Society" that the Greek and Roman gens is identical in all essentials with the Indian "totem group," the only important difference between them being that among the Indians, except where European influence had crept in, the common ancestor of the group was a woman, female descent prevailed and children always remained in the same totem group as their mother, whereas among the early Greeks and Romans the recognized ancestor was a male, paternal descent was the rule, and children belonged to the gens of their father.

Morgan considered the former an archaic or primitive, and the latter the derived and modified, form of same organization, which he decided out of consistency to henceforth refer to by its Latin name of "gens." He believed that the change from the maternal to the paternal gens was an

outcome of the growth of private property, possession of which instilled into the fathers a desire that this wealth should be enjoyed, after the death of themselves, by their own children.

Under the law of the gens the property of a member had to remain within the group, and as the maternal system placed a man's children in their mother's gens, never in his own, they were disinherited as regards their father's property. By introducing male descent and thus keeping children in their father's gens they were enabled to inherit his property. Morgan clinched his argument by showing this change to have actually taken place in recent years with the growth of private property among several Indian tribes as a result of foreign influences.

Having thus placed ancient history upon a sound basis Morgan endeavors to show the stages by which, in Greece and in Rome, the social organization of the gens and the tribe passed away and was supplanted by a form of society based upon possession of property and territorial residence. In a series of brilliant chapters he shows how increasing population, intermixture of tribes, growing division of social functions, and above all, the increase in private property, and its concentration into the hands of a few, all results of the "enlargement of the sources of subsistence," gradually undermined the institutions founded on kinship and prepared the way for and made necessary the rise of the political State.

Morgan's analysis still holds good, but it may be usefully supplemented by Engels' "Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State," which shows that class-oppression is the function of the State-power. Morgan did not deal with the feudal form of political society which developed from gentile society in a somewhat different fashion, but Engels outlined its beginning among the Germans and it has been adequately if briefly treated in a generalized manner by Edward Jenks in his "Short History of Politics."

One of the most instructive and important chapters in "Ancient Society" treats of the native culture of Mexico prior to the Spanish Conquest. Investigation had convinced Morgan that the records of the Spaniards, together with the historical works which like Prescott's, were built upon them, were very unreliable wherever they dealt with the social institutions of either the Aztecs or the Incas of Peru. The Spaniards, accustomed only to the social relations of a feudal monarchy, completely misunderstood what little they did observe of Mexican and Peruvian society. They interpreted the league of tribes as an empire and the war-chief of the Aztec federation as an Emperor.

Morgan did valuable pioneer work in unravelling the mystery of "Aztec civilization," and had already criticized the prevailing misconceptions in some of the articles we have referred to. Moreover, in this field he had the assistance of his friend, Adolph H. Bandelier (1840-1914), a Swiss who had gone to America, and the leading authority at that time on the archeology of Mexico, Arizona,

and New Mexico.

In "Ancient Society" Morgan's conclusions were fully stated and the evidence massed which showed that the Aztecs were, at the time of their discovery by Europeans, in the Middle Status of Barbarism, intermediate between the Iroquois and the Greeks of the Homeric period, and that they lived in village communities based upon the gens.

By revealing the inner structure of tribal society Morgan performed a signal service to sociology. Incidentally he showed and was one of the first to appreciate the fact, now generally recognized, that the barbarian is not a bloodthirsty monster of ferocity, and that his society, far from being a despotism ruled over by a brutal, tyrannical chieftain, is usually a well-organized, democratic body. "All the members of an Iroquois gens were personally free, and they were bound to defend each other's freedom; they were equal in privileges and in personal rights, the sachems and chiefs claiming no superiority; and they were a brotherhood bound together by ties of kin. Liberty, equality, and fraternity though never formulated, were cardinal principles of the gens." ("Ancient Society," page 85.)

The Family and Property

In the third part of "Ancient Society," which describes the evolution of the family, Morgan not only restated his theory (which we have already outlined) in a revised, more complete, and widely generalized form, but he devoted a special section to a refutation of the criticisms of McLennan, the author of "Primitive Marriage." He was now in a position to show that McLennan's position was, in the light of the fresh discoveries, completely untenable, his theory of tribal Endogamy* and Exogamy* being due to the common confusion of the gens with the tribe.

Morgan's theory of the family is generally accepted today in its main outlines. His most important error lay in considering the patriarchal family to be an exceptional form instead of, as has been since shown by the Russian student, Maxim Kovalevsky, and others, to be a widespread institution characteristic of the Middle and Upper stages of Barbarism, and as the intermediary almost everywhere manifest between the patriarchal family and monogamy.

In his concluding part Morgan outlines his view of the development of property. He shows how, feebly developed and largely communal during Savagery, it achieves more definite recognition and power during the pastoral stage in the period of Barbarism and reaches almost complete dominance in social life with the greatly increased productivity of the epoch of Civilization.

He defines three successive systems of property inheritance, the first two of which correspond with the two

Notes*

Endogamy: The custom by which a man is bound to take a wife from his own tribe.

Exogamy: The custom which forbids a man to marry a woman of his own tribe and compels him to seek a wife in another tribe.

stages of female and male descent in the gens among the members of which the property of a deceased member was divided; the third system harmonizing with the monogamous family in which the father's property is inherited exclusively by his own family.

Morgan's observations on the social significance of private property are very acute and approximate very closely to the Marxian position. He says: "It is impossible to overestimate the influence of property in the civilization of mankind. It was the power that brought the Aryan and Semitic nations out of barbarism into civilization. The growth of the idea of property in the human mind commenced in feebleness and ended in becoming its master passion. Governments and laws are instituted with primary reference to its creation, protection, and enjoyment. It introduced human slavery as an instrument in its production; and after the experience of several thousand years, it caused the abolition of slavery upon the discovery that a freeman was a better property-making machine." (Pp. 511-512.)

"The time will come, nevertheless, when human intelligence will rise to the mastery over property . . . The interests of society are paramount to individual interests, and the two must be brought into just and harmonious relations. A mere property career is not the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past. The time which has passed away since civilization began is but a fragment of the past of man's existence; and but a fragment of the ages yet to come. The dissolution of society bids fair to become the termination of a career of which property is the end and aim; because such a career contains the elements of self-destruction." P. 561.)

Final Work

With the publications of his principal literary work, the real culmination of his long enquiry into the evolution of human culture, Morgan did not by any means rest from his scientific labors. A true scientist, he continued to investigate and to generalize from the facts so observed, ever searching for fresh truths, ever seeking further to contribute to the totality of human knowledge.

In 1876 he visited the ancient and the modern pueblos, or native villages of Colorado and New Mexico. An early result was his essay on "Communal Living Among the Village Indians."

He devoted his attentions especially to the architecture and domestic life of the Indians, and his final conclusions on this phase of their life were embodied in his last great book, "Houses and House-life of the American Aborigines," which appeared in 1881. This work contains abundant information on the property relations of the Indians and shows in great detail the communistic habits and modes of thought which pervaded their life. Commenting upon the brotherhood and hospitality of the Redskins Morgan says in a striking passage: "If a man entered an Indian house in any of their villages, whether a villager

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