

# Materialist Conception of History

## FOR BEGINNERS

### Lesson 12.

THE discovery of America by some historians is called the "Transition Period," or the bridge from mediæval to modern history. Constantinople being captured by the Turks, 1453, cut off the trade route to India. This led to the discovery of America by Columbus, in an endeavor to find a maritime trade route for Portuguese trade. The fact is now clearly recognized that it was through economic causes, the chief of which was a maritime route to India to escape the annoyance and the payment of tribute to the Turks. This period embraces some marked events and revolutions in social affairs, such as the invention of printing, gunpowder with its consequent changes in the art of war, the decline of feudalism and establishment of centralized monarchies.

A sea route to India around Cape of Good Hope in 1498 was discovered by Vasco di Gama. When he turned the Cape into the Indian Ocean he discovered Arabians directing their vessels by an instrument which is now called a compass. De Gibbin says that competition began to operate as a new force, and men made haste to grow rich. The merchants became bolder and more enterprising in their ventures.

The merchants of Spain and Genoa found it more profitable to hire captains whose ideas were injected from the pagan Arabians, than those whose ideas of the universe were taken from the city bishop or village priest, and who kept their ships close to land, afraid lest they should sail over the edge of the world or fall into the hole where the angels put the sun at night, after they had rolled it across the sky. By this time, the craftsmen had reached the height of their power. At no time were wages, relatively speaking, so high and at no time was food so cheap. All attempts by legislation to lower wages failed. They had an eight hour day with 40 religious holidays, quitting on Saturdays and the day previous to all holidays at four p.m. Food was so abundant and cheap that it was sometimes thrown in with wages. The prices during this golden age of the English laborers were:

1 lb. butter, 1½ cents.

1 lb. cheese, 1 cent.

Eggs, 40 for 2 cents.

The average price for the two years, 1449-1450, were: Geese, 8 cents; fowls, 3 cents each; pigeons, 8 cents a dozen; candles, 26 cents for 12 pounds; butter, 1 cent a pound; cheese, 1 1-3 cents a pound; eggs, 11 cents for 120; cloth, 34 cents a yard; shirting, 12 cents a yard. Yet the workers today are fighting for this eight hour day, and their wages cannot buy what the 75 cents a week could during the above period.

Their craft guilds had taken the place previously held by the merchants' guilds. They dominated in town authority. Even as late as the fifteenth century in France, the entire population participated in the elections of the towns. When oppressed they were all for the overthrow of the existing order, but like the merchants, when they had secured their freedom, they too, began to be restrictive, raising entrance fees, and enforcing long apprenticeship, compelling journeymen to declare they would not "set up" for themselves. By means of political action, and Acts of Parliament, industries were prohibited, except in towns.

With the accumulation of wealth, the master worker was converted into a non-laboring capitalist, and the journeyman into a wage-worker. In proportion as their wealth increased, their economic power increased, the more successful were their attempts to exclude the people from all share in the government of the towns. The whole history of the 16th to the 18th century comprises accounts of the successive reductions in the people's privileges and the increasing power of the oligarchy.

Towns began to decay in the reign of Henry

VII. and Henry VIII. because of the guild restrictions, which cramped the rising manufacturing industries. They therefore moved to open villages. Laws to check this moving was of no avail, and Henry VII. attempted to remedy this evil by limiting the privileges of the guilds, but even this step was useless. Master manufacturers, weary of municipal and guild restrictions organized in country places, little communities solely for industrial centres, so arranged to afford scope for division of labor and the apprenticeship system, to produce, not for local use as previously, but for the market at large. The break up of the feudal system, the migration to the towns of those who were put off the land to make room for sheep and wool growing, and the shutting out of those immigrants by guild restriction, helped to furnish the first elements for the formation of a labor market.

The introduction of a division of labor was a revolution not of the tool but of the laborer himself, because he no longer completed the commodity but was a mere cog in the collective labor process. The worker was no longer productive without the other workers, and as it required an increasing amount of capital to carry on business, by this new method the worker had less and less opportunity to escape from this dependence on capital. Whereas the guild craftsman was only temporarily a wage-earner, the handicraft workmen in the capitalist manufactory tended to become permanent. It was from communities such as these that Manchester, Bolton, Leeds, Halifax and Bury took their rise and afterwards developed into the great factory towns of today. This specialization of the laborer led to the specialization of the tools he used, but was curtailed in development until the industrial revolution of the 18th century, brought about by the introduction of the steam engine.

The guild towns were not capitalist productive concerns. They lacked two characteristics of capitalist production; free competition and unrestricted accumulation. Capital, which first appeared in commerce and money lending, received a great impetus to development from the discovery of the new lands and sea routes. The development of foreign trade involved the development of the home market and necessitated an extension of production. The guild restrictions stood in the way of progress, and disappeared before the conquering force of economic development. The industrial classes were strengthened by the Wars of the Roses, which weakened the Barons. The king was encouraging the commercial classes, as the duty on their exports helped his treasury in increased wealth and the nation was prosperous in wealth and industry, at the close of 1500 A.D.

We now arrive at the period of the Reformation. In 1522, Henry VIII. received the title of "Defender of the Faith" from the Pope, because he wrote a treatise against Luther, but five years later when Henry desired a divorce, which the Pope refused to give, Henry passed a supremacy law, making himself head of the church, and divided the church lands amongst the land lords who supported him.

Luther is one of Carlyle's heroes in his book "Hero Worship," but the Reformation was brought about by economic causes. Some people have been led into the error of ascribing all modern enlightenment to the influence of Protestantism; overlooking the fact that economic forces produced the conditions for Protestantism. Carlyle ignores the fact that had it not been to the material interests of the German nobles, Luther would either not have revolted in the first place, or he would have been shipped to Rome and burned at the stake. Carlyle himself relates how Luther had been disgusted with what he saw when visiting Rome, but decided to keep quiet, and Carlyle's narrative infers, if the Dominican Monk Tetzel had passed by Wurttemberg and left Luther in the undisturbed posses-

sion of his flock, there might have been no Reformation. Luther's own people pleaded with him, that they had already got their sins pardoned by buying indulgences from Tetzel. This is Luther, who marched to Worms with the Emperor's safe conduct. He flouted the terrible power of the Papacy with the ruling class of his own and other countries solidly behind him. The church owned most of the land, which was acquired by gift, fraud and robbery, but the industrial development forced new ideas, as the ideas of the middle ages were utterly incompatible with the free industrial and commercial spirit of the time, so it was no accident that the Reformation made progress in the free towns of feudal Europe. Ever since the year 800, when the Pope had crowned the German King "Emperor of the Romans," the church had received liberal grants of land. The church was holding enormous territory all over Germany, and the German princes had no longer anything to gain from remaining on good terms with the Pope, so they threw off the claims of the church and annexed the church lands, gaining wealth and freedom at the same time. This resulted in the 30 years war with Austria whose Emperor claimed the imperial crown. Although the Protestants were more numerous, the jealousy amongst the princes split them. The Emperor won victory after victory until he felt strong enough to issue a decree that all church lands which had been taken, be returned to the church. Here was a common ground to unite the princes, and the treaty of peace was signed, leaving the land as it was before the war in the hands of the princes. This was the time France got the territory along the Rhine (Alsace and Lorraine) and Switzerland, its independence from Germany, in 1648.

It would be preposterous to think the world would be enlightened by a superstitious, ignorant fanatic like Luther, who believed that three toads spitted on a stick would extract poison from a wound. Luther said of Copernicus and his discovery of the earth revolving: "People gave ear to an upstart astrologer, who strove to show that the earth revolves, not the heavens or the firmament, the sun and the moon. Whosoever wishes to appear great must devise some new system, which of all systems, of course is the best. This fool wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy, but the sacred scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still and not the earth."

When the peasants, who applauded Luther, revolted against their terrible conditions Luther said: "No mercy, no toleration is due the peasants, on them should fall the wrath of God and of man." He recommended they be treated like mad dogs. Peasant uprisings were stamped out just as brutally as ever Rome was capable of. Protestantism was the religion of capitalism because the Roman church was a fetter upon the development of this class. If any proof is desired that the Reformation was economic and not moral in character there is no need to go further than the fact: Henry VIII. murdered several wives; Luther murdered Tom Munzer; John Calvin murdered Servitus; John Knox raved in a blind rage that all ungodly should be rooted from the earth. A fine bunch to reform anything.

Rogers in "Work and Wages," says: "The discontent of the country and towns alike, had no little influence on the temper which gave Luther a hearing and the theses of Witemberg an ominous significance. The decline of trade, the pressure of poverty, the discontent engendered by distress, the angry enquiry into the causes of these unexplained calamities, the reference of these distresses to Papal extortion and extravagance, and the outburst for a passionate reform of the church. The enquiry into the causes of commercial and social decay became wider, and the discontent with authority more marked, the western world revolted."

Loria says: "If the church of the middle ages strove to mitigate the evils, it would do so on con-

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