

Materialist Conception of History

FOR BEGINNERS

LESSON 13.

THROUGH the influx of gold from America (and king Henry VIII debasing the currency) the value of the shilling fell to sixpence, and wages could not keep pace with commodity prices. This reduced wages so low that the work day was lengthened. The workers were cheated out of their wages and degraded to the lowest depths of poverty. The dissolution of the monasteries enriched the nobles. The merchants who bought the confiscated lands, deprived laborers of charity relief, which the monasteries gave them in bad times or occasional misfortunes.

The number of persons who, owing to the decay of feudalism, were torn from their moorings and left to drift about in a world utterly unprepared to absorb them in employment, augmented vagabondage. The vagrants had never before been so numerous. A portion became the suckers of Kings and Princes, and became the germ of a standing army. A large proportion became beggars and robbers, living by plunder and murder. There were hundreds of executions for vagrancy, as if men could work or pay and none of them to be found.

The rapid growth of the woollen trade plunged the serfs into abject poverty through the evictions off the land. Sheep raising needed few laborers and much land, therefore landlords fenced in the commons and evicted the peasants and tenants, and rent-racked any cultivator that remained. The peasants were down and out, not having even the common lands to graze their cow. The portion who did not rob and plunder, sought domicile in the rising towns. The towns became flooded with labor seeking employment which was not to be found. The suppression of the craft guilds had the effect of depriving the town laborer of his organization. Therefore we had the first indication of the modern proletariat.

This condition brought on the rebellion of 1549 (which defeated the Royal troops), led by Ket, a tanner of Norwich. Rogers in "Work and Wages," says: "It is said that the Norfolk Rebellion was due to the discontent about enclosures in that county, and that similar disaffection was manifest elsewhere. It is probable that other and stronger motives were at work; but the statement that the peasantry were stirred to sedition by these practices is sufficient evidence of the fact that the practice was general." This rebellion was put down by Lord Warwick with the aid of German troops.

Certain results of the increased commercial activity began to appear. One of these was the rapid growth of cities and the rise of what has been called the third estate. In medieval language the first estate was the clergy, and the second the baronage. Now appeared the mercantile and manufacturing class, and from its numbers and its wealth it had the power to make its demands listened to and enforced. One of the first things which this new class demanded, was security, both for the protection of property and a safer and better means of communication. This led to the landed class improving roads from one place to another and charging toll for same. They did not realize that by doing this they were aiding the destruction of economic conditions which sustained the feudal system and its power. Another most important result of the increase of commerce was the large amount of money which it necessarily brought into use. This was very destructive for feudalism, because it cut from under that system the whole economic foundation. The regime of barter was no longer necessary. The owner of land could now obtain an income from land in the form of money, and could purchase services he needed with greater advantage than when he rented his land directly for service. This increase of money also affected the feudal system as decisively on its political side. The State was no longer dependent on the formation of its army or any other public service. The government introduced regular taxation and made themselves independent of feudal services. These economic changes had a great

effect upon the serf class. The growth of towns offered him a place to escape to from his serfdom, and the scarcity of labor tended to increase wages, but the golden age faded away with the influx of gold after the discovery of America.

In Queen Mary's reign the Roman Catholic religion was restored and mass was reintroduced into the church. The Pope's representative with a silver cross on the front of the barge sailed up the Thames, granting absolution in the Pope's name to the Lords and Commons, who knelt to receive it. There was no opposition, but when Pope Paul VI. demanded that every acre of the church property previously confiscated be given back, it was too much for the land barons who knew where their heaven lay. Therefore the dividing of the church lands in Henry VIII's time had put an effectual stop to the Pope regaining any real hold on England. Scotland also gradually adopted Protestantism. The nobles also zealous of the wealth and power of the church, encouraged the new religion. They also benefitted by the dividing of the church lands, which they also confiscated. Queen Mary of Scotland, appealed to Catholic France for help, she being a Catholic. The Protestants appealed to Queen Elizabeth, who refused to help the rebels, until a French army (her enemy) landing in Scotland became a certainty. She sent a fleet to the Firth of Forth with 8,000 men, which resulted in the Treaty of Edinburgh, 1560, the French to leave Scotland.

The nobility, enriched by the spoils of the church and their increased wealth through the wool trade, suspended the payment of members, which gave them the monopoly of political power. Although trade in England was prosperous, the distress amongst the workers was so great that the Mayor and churchwardens were compelled to raise funds for relief. This was the introduction of poor law relief in 1562. The guardians of Edward attempted, in a savage statute passed in the first year of his reign, to restrain pauperism and vagabondage by reducing landless and destitute poor to slavery, by branding them and making them work in chains. The Act only endured two years. The poor law proper was not enacted until the period following upon the industrial revolution, which we will deal with in a future lesson.

Around 1576, 1583, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, discovered the Hudson Bay and took possession of Newfoundland. Raleigh, Hawkins and Drake undertook voyages of discovery. Hawkins was the first to carry slaves from Africa to America, trading them for rum. Hawkins received royal recognition of his gallant exploits in this trade and received from the good Queen Elizabeth a ship called "Jesus" to encourage him in his Christian enterprise. Drake was the first Englishman to sail around the world, the son of a Devonshire clergyman who went to Spanish America and sacked the gold ships of Spain, which caused the Spanish war. Drake sailed again in 1585 with 25 vessels to Spanish America and returned laden with plunder. Spain prepared for war to hold on to her commercial supremacy. The Portuguese in Africa and India, and the Spanish in America, after their discoveries immediately took possession of these countries, developed on ocean commerce. The Portuguese established their factories along the coasts of India and in the East Indian Islands. The fabulous riches of Mexico and Peru attracted the Spaniards, and the Armada fleet of Spain was defeated in the English Channel in July 1588, a battle over the plunder of America, which Drake had stolen from Spanish ships. This success for England established the independence of the Dutch, who were the next commercial rival of England.

The years following the Spanish defeat were years of triumph for England. Her chief articles of export to the continent were, wool, cloth, lead and tin. Queen Elizabeth granted a charter to the East India Company the year after the Armada. There were charters granted to a Russian Company in

1554, and a Turkish Company in 1551. This was due to heavy costs and risks in remote foreign trade. This was the origin of corporate organizations of capital, to finance and fit ships with arms against pirates. To encourage this trade each company was incorporated to have the sole right to trade in certain regions. The difference between them and corporate companies today is, the former was an organization of persons carrying on individual trade, joined for convenience in carrying their wares. The latter is essentially an organization of capital in which it is indifferent as to who are its members, the members indifferent as to what trade it is engaged in so long as the corporation pays dividends.

The first companies chartered had four features not to be found in the companies of today.

1st—They paid the expense of the trading post;
2nd—They carried on individual trade
3rd—They were not responsible for the debts of the company, like a partner.

4th—They could not sell rights like a shareholder. Out of these grew Joint Stock Companies when capitalism had greatly developed. The Flemish towns suffered severely with the Spanish invasions and the persecution of the notorious Alva. This caused the Flemings to emigrate to England, and gave a great impulse to England's commercial supremacy, because the English wool could be manufactured at home into cloth. Therefore in Elizabeth's reign England advanced politically and commercially from the position of a second to a first rate power.

There were troublous times in Ireland. England not being able to force her rule on Ireland from 1602, she adopted a policy of bribing the chiefs of the tribes with heavy bribes, granting them the lands of the suppressed abbey in return for a promise of loyalty. The English law courts, ignoring the customs by which the land belonged to the tribe at large regarded the chiefs as sole proprietors. During the reign of James I., large numbers of Scotch and English settlers had lands given to them in Leinster and Ulster, on condition that they preserve order. These are known as the Leinster and Ulster plantations; by them two-thirds of the land of North Ireland passed into the hands of strangers. Although this change brought some prosperity, the unjust method of carrying it out raised a bitter spirit which lasts to this day. We will see at a future date the real economic causes of the Irish question.

This is the King James of the Bible translation fame, who persecuted the Puritans who crossed in the May flower and founded the New England States in America. This religious body did not allow their religious scruples to interfere with their swindling business methods in transactions with the Indians in the country of their adoption. The statement made by the Rev. Roland D. Sawyer of America is true: "No religious institution that the world has ever seen, has had a religion strong enough to control its conduct, when its economic security was in anyway threatened. If slavery means dollars and cents in the pockets of the ruling interest, then slavery is a divine institution."

In Charles I.'s reign, who was practically an absolute monarch, dissolving parliament whenever he pleased, ignoring the Magna Charta and jailing men for refusing to lend money, the Commons brought in a Bill of Rights against illegal fines, taxations and imprisonments agreed to by the Lords. The king struggled hard against it, but being pressed for money he was obliged to give in and it became law in 1628. The capitalist class was growing stronger, and when Charles carried on for eleven years without a parliament they chopped his head off. The break up of the feudal manors and the decay of guild production owing to its inability to supply the wider market now developed, came to be the idea of the nation as a trading unit. The local market with its narrow outlook in which the town was everything, made way for the national market. Nationalism had its beginning, and the realm was

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