

What is a Point of View?

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PART I.

When confronted by the same set of facts which go to make up a social problem, it is but too well known that opinions differ among people as to the nature and significance of the facts and, as a consequence, opinions differ as to what had best be done under the circumstances. While it is true that one of the essentials for unanimity of opinion is an exhaustive enquiry into the facts of a social problem and a wide distribution of information about them, it is not the only essential. It often comes as a discouraging shock to many people, who hoped for a harmonious settlement of some problem as a result of a reasoned consideration of all the facts, to find, after all, that unanimity of opinion as to the nature of the problem is not thus necessarily ensured. The trouble, in such a case, as in like case with the social problem exhibited by our industrial system today, is that the differences of opinion arise only in comparatively small degree from lack of acquaintance with facts, but mainly arise from differences in the point of view, i.e., in a difference in mental prepossessions which form the bases of opinion or standards of judgement, with which different people approach the observation and consideration of the facts of a problem. In this article, I am treating of the points of view upon social problems and why they differ. In Veblen's "The Vested Interests," a small volume of collected essays, he has, in part, this to say: "What is spoken of as a point of view is always a composite affair: some sort of a rounded and balanced system of principles and standards, which are taken for granted, at least provisionally, and which serve as a base of reference and legitimation in all questions of deliberate opinion. So when any given usage or any line of conduct or belief is seen and approved from the modern (capitalist, C. S.) point of view, it comes to the same as saying that these things are seen and accepted in the light of those principles which modern men habitually consider to be final and sufficient. They are principles of right, equity, propriety, duty, perhaps of knowledge, belief, and taste."

The capitalist or bourgeois point of view supports the present industrial system of production for profit through the exploitation of wage-labor, and regards as sacred the "rights" of private property in the material means of wealth production. The Socialists aim for a revolutionary overturn of the capitalist system of production, into an industrial system based upon the common ownership of the means of wealth production; production to be carried on for the livelihood of society as a whole primarily, instead of for the profit of a few.

The knowledge of the twentieth century of the ways and means of production, is the cumulative result of the experiences of the human race all down the ages. It is a social product and it is in the possession of society as a whole, though the bulk of it, is in that section of society, the producing population. This knowledge is ineffective unless it has access to the material means of production. The discretionary use and the benefits of this knowledge are thus in the control of the capitalist class who own the material means of production, to which society must have access in order to live. The bourgeois point of view regards this industrial order of things as eternally right and good.

The socialist point of view, on the other hand, denounces that order of things and claims that the so-called eternal and sacred "rights" of property are mere prescriptive rights, i.e., rights that, by long use and custom, together with coercive force and partizan education, have received social sanction in law. Thus their tenure is a temporary one, and it may be annulled without fear of offending the (supposed) eternal verities, divine or otherwise. The Socialist point of view holds that it is in the best

interests of society, even a dire necessity, that it take over the material means of production and operate them as a social plant for the benefit of society as a whole. The bourgeois point of view conceives of an industrial system as existing for private advantage. The Socialist point of view conceives of it as a means or an instrument of community welfare. This disregarding of the metaphysical concept of "rights" to private ownership in the material means of wealth production, and regarding the industrial organization solely in its functional aspect is characteristic of the mechanistic thought that is a typical product of the influence of the machine processes of production on the mind of this age. As propagandists of that point of view, Socialists are but the conscious expression of the great social drift towards a new order of life and thought.

Socialists have the task set them of removing from the minds of the working class the bourgeois point of view, and, of substituting in its place the Socialist or revolutionary proletarian point of view. Therefore, the nature of a point of view, its source, how it is acquired, and the quality of its hold on the mind should be worthy of consideration as having a bearing on our educational work, both as to its character and to our methods. This article is but a summary treatment of its subject, to which is applied the materialistic conception, but I hope it may serve as a good lead to thought on the subject.

Points of view, I have already said, are mental prepossessions, a balanced system of ideas, which serve as the bases of opinion. They are a set of ideas, a mental attitude, which we possess beforehand and bring to bear upon any matter the mind takes up. Such ideas are always regarded by those who hold them as "common sense" ideas. Mental prepossessions are the reflections of the social and natural environment. Thus there are group prepossessions, as, for instance, occupational prepossessions, the prepossessions of class, and natural prepossessions. These are also the prepossessions of a particular age or epoch, which prevail generally throughout all sections of society. These mental prepossessions pertain to those broader features of human interest with which art, science, religion and philosophy deal, and in some degree they may be regarded as a consensus of all the other prepossessions and as thus expressing the intellectual temper of an age. All these specific prepossessions may exist in the mind together, but merging with and modifying each other. Being reflections of the material environment ever in process of change, the mental prepossessions are thus subject also to change, but being ideas that have become habits of thought, engraved in the minds by long use, they persist in the mind as traditional prepossessions, sometimes long after the material conditions which gave them birth have passed away. However, they are subject to displacement by the ideas which spring out of new material conditions. Thus in every mind there is a constant war going on between the traditional prepossessions and the new ones for the dominant position. Man is, in that sense, a dual personality. Prepossessions of that nature, prevalent during any age, are the cultural effect upon the mind or the discipline of the habits of life of a people enforced by the manner and conditions of procuring a livelihood on the one hand, and on the other, by those habits of life entailed in conforming to an order of institutions economic, political, legal and religious, around which, as the organs of the body politic, a society may be organized. These factors, the conditions of work-day life and the institutional character of the society, which latter is conditioned on the stage of development in production, are the great cultural influences in a social environment. Either of these factors will be dominant as a cultural influence according to whether industrial activity, as in capitalism, or predation and war, as in feudal society, is the dominant feature in the social life of a people.

Every age has its own general prepossessions, held to more or less firmly by all sections of society. Thus we are able to contrast the point of view of antiquity with that of medieval times, and the latter with the modern point of view, and to trace the slow and gradual change from one to the other, due, not to the self developing power of intelligence but, primarily, to changes and improvements in the ways and means by which society gets its living and, secondarily, as an outcome of those changes, to changes in the institutional features of society. Such points of view then, being the mental reflexes of habituation to material conditions of life, are not consciously acquired and are thus not of reasoned conviction; they are, on the contrary, held uncritically in every age. It is from such prepossessions that men arise, as it were, from a spring-board to a reasoned consideration of facts. When the material conditions of life change, they enforce new habits of life and thought, at first among those coming most nearly under their influence, as well as among a few sensitive intelligences. Later, they affect the whole of society in some degree as the new conditions become more and more the normal and dominant features of a new order of social life. The old prepossessions gradually lose force, but die hard, for they have the tenacity of age-long habits. This natural slowness of mental change, caused by the retarding effect of habit, is still further augmented in class societies by the efforts of ruling classes to preserve the traditional point of view.

Within every society based upon the institutions of property, classes arise with conflicting economic interests. As this conflict develops, besides the different points of view which arise from differences in modes of life, there also arises in each class a point of view antagonistic to the other class or classes as the case may be. Though the prepossessions held in common by society at large are the result of habituation to certain material conditions of life and are thus not consciously acquired or of reasoned conviction, the class prepossessions, in so far as they relate to the conflict of economic interests, are a result of a more or less successful reasoned apprehension and consideration of the conflicting interests at issue between the classes. Such reasoned out prepossessions may be also, by habitual study and reflections on the economic questions at issue between the classes, so strengthened as to become mental habits, and thus we can have instant and effortless recourse to judgment upon which to form opinion on any social question involving a class viewpoint. This habit-contracting trait of the human mind acts as a labor saving device without which we could hardly exist as reasoning beings; for, we should endlessly have to laboriously reason out a basis of judgment for each one of the innumerable opinions and decisions that life activities call for.

Part II. of this article deals with the animistic preconception of primitive man as an illustration of the nature of a point of view.

THE FAMINE AS A MEANS OF PRESSURE

Moscow July 26th.

"Rosta Wien."

The statement of foreign papers that the Soviet government has applied to the American government for the despatch of food and that the former has surrendered the control over this food is an invention of these papers. America has made no proposals to the Soviet government in reference to the despatch of food and in the same way the Soviet government has carried on no negotiations with America. The foreign press have merely made use of the appeals of Maxim Gorky and the Patriarch Tiekon to make demands upon the Soviet government.

(Since this message left Moscow the bourgeois press brings reports of a definite proposal on the part of Mr. Hoover. These proposals are bound to lead to negotiations. The fact that these reports have crossed should not however lead to confusion.)