

ECONOMIC INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY.

GRADUATING THESIS.

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OUTLINE.

ECONOMIC INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY.

Introduction.

Purpose of Thesis.

Illustrated by giving causes of fall of Napoleon.

Definition of Subject.

Discussion.

- 1. (a) Allowance made for other causes of historical changes.
- (b) French Revolution, as to causes, economic and otherwise.
- (c) Crusades described as type of change having opposite motives, and result.
- (d) Value of Idealism.
- (e) Determination of National policies.
- 2. Dependence of nations upon economical conditions relating to finances.
- Popular wars of enthusiasm and wars of necessity compared.
- Necessity of national policies agreeing with economic conditions.

Conclusion.

Determination of the true value of the Economic Interpretation of History.

Bibliography.

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ECONOMIC INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY.

The careful student of history cannot fail to notice the tendency, quite common among historians, to overestimate the influence of great men in shaping the destinies of nations. They make the story of national life to appear as a composite biography of those who played leading roles in the drama of politics or the tragedy of war. Individuals are made masters of human destiny instead of creatures of opportunity. While the "Great men" theory, and the theory of "Moral forces" in historic interpretation are by no means to be undervalued, the contention is here made, that their importance, as historic factors, has been greatly exaggerated.

A casual reader of history will find nothing whatever, in much of it, to give any clue to the reasons or causes of the changes which are chronicled. The historian who narrates the deeds of an Alexander or a Napoleon, is prone to forget the people and conditions which made their careers possible. We rarely read of the years of suffering and misery which these people underwent as a result of their country's having been drained of its resources. History tells of the fall of Napoleon, but it tells only, that his army was defeated, while he, himself, was captured and imprisoned. It does not mention the exhaustion of resources which the country suffered at the time and which made it impossible to raise men and supplies. Nor does it tell of the economic principles which he antagonized when he issued the famous Berlin and Milan decrees, that were so instrumental in alienating the people and capital of the nation from his support. This constitutes the real fall of Napoleon.

Before entering into the discussion of this subject, it may be well to give some explanation of what it is understood to mean.

By the economic interpretation of history is meant the influence which the underlying causes, relating to the production and consumption of the necessities and luxuries of life, have and always will have in the history of the human race.

"The existence of man depends upon his ability to sustain himself; the economic life is therefore the fundamental condition of all life."

To some idealists this view of life and history may be sordid and gross in the extreme, but never-the-less it cannot be denied that mankind has always been patriotic when its business has been threatened, and has been consistently hard to arouse at other times. This thesis does not intend to advance the theory that the sole causes of historical changes have been the economic causes. This would be to make a greater mistake than is made by those who ignore this side of the question altogether. There are, and nearly always have been, races of people in the world who have had principles and customs, for which they would struggle more strenuously than some other races would struggle for their very existence. It will be shown in connection with this, that patriotism is at bottom, founded in the fundamental economics of the nation.

An extended list of illustrations showing how the industrial conditions of a country have affected its history, might be given. The French Revolution suggests itself readily as an example, the causes of which, probably, more clearly than any other instance, can be traced directly to industrial conditions. The claim might be advanced that all history is caused by economic influences, but this would be forgetting the spiritual and aesthetic influences which are very strong in all civilized countries. The statement will be made,

however, that in over-rich nations, and in nations in desperate circumstances, the economic influences are the stronger. In an over-rich nation the riches are generally confined to a very small proportion of the population and this condition soon results in revolution or disintegration. Either of these results is economic. If the people have lost all their power of action and have become practically slaves, the nation will fall; but if they see the danger of their situation before too late, there will be a revolution; and if the revolution is successful, the rebels become patriots. Then it is very probable that the economic principle which they fought for at first, will become a national principle, and the economic basis be forgotten. The historians will tell of the spirit which prompted these people to throw off the oppressor's yoke, when in reality the spirit consisted of the fact that they foresaw nothing but prolonged hardships before them, under existing conditions. A poor nation is generally poor because its resources have been misappropriated.

To counter-balance the grossness which this description gives the human race, the Crusades, a set of purely religious wars, both in their origins and conclusions, may be studied. One of the first things noticed, however, is that these wars of religious enthusiasm were a good many years apart. In fact, the temptation arises to say that the Europeans had no desire to reform Asia, except after they had been quiet and prosperous for years. Then the agitators found a fertile field in which to sow their seeds of religious enthusiasm; and promises of future glory, connected with plenty of plunder in the nearer future, were sufficient to raise armies.

But different conditions arise at different times. At one time following the period of the Crusades, Constantinople, the outpost of Christianity, was besieged by the armies of the Mohammedan church.

Constantinople sent repeated appeals to the Christian countries of Western Europe for aid, but no mention is made of a single instance in which this aid was furnished. While the reasons for this action are not manifest, these two may be advanced: either that the people of Europe had ceased to be actively interested in Christianity, or that they, as historians so frequently affirm, were allowing their jealousies of each other to stand in the way of any concerted action towards the relief of Constantinople. The first of these is untenable, and the second contains no more than a few germs of truth. Another reason than those mentioned, may be found, however, by reading a little closely a history of the facts of the times, where the historian's imagination has not been sufficient to give an ethereal color to the life of the Middle Ages. Such a history discloses the fact that, though the people generally, were willing to help Constantinople, there were none, or but few, who were in a condition, individually, to do so. They were busy recuperating after the enthusiastic expenditure of energy of the previous years. There was none of the exuberance of spirit remaining which they had formerly manifested. It had burned itself out, and nothing was left but the ashes of their once brightly burning enthusiasm.

There was no economic basis to the struggle, consequently with the lapse of enthusiasm, the wars ceased, with nothing accomplished.

If these things are true, then the idealist will say that these people knew nothing of the higher life; that they were gross and sordid in the extreme. But they acted in exact accordance with human nature, and as the members of the human race will always act. When a people finds itself prosperous and peaceful for any length of time, there arises a feeling that the conditions surrounding some other people should be remedied, whether they would or no; then, after a

period of effort in this direction, when the enthusiasm has simmered down, immensely worse conditions may arise and call forth no comment whatever. The trouble with the idealist is, that he wants to reform the other side of the world, but sees nothing wrong with the conditions with which he is more familiar. As has been said before, numerous instances of this kind might be cited to show the dominance of economic causes. There is no purpose, however, to make it appear that the human race lives to eat alone; the purpose rather is to show that it must eat, first; that prosperous economic conditions must precede all other progress.

Economic conditions affect man on every side, in his home, business and social relations. Then, if these conditions affect each man in a nation, it is idle to maintain that they do not affect the nation. A nation is what its people are. If the people are traders, the national policies will foster commerce. If they are farmers, the policy of the government will favor that industry, and all the idealism, and higher life theories in the world, will not make these traders or farmers rest quietly under a provision which is detrimental to their interests. In the French Revolution, all the other influences combined were overcome by the economic influence. Habit, religion and training all were calling to the French people to submit to existing conditions. It was not a search for the Higher Life which led the people of Paris to rise against all that they had been taught to believe in. It was a search for means of satisfying their hunger. To be sure there were philosophers and thinkers such as Wordsworth and Franklin, probably a fairly numerous group, who thought they saw promises of the regeneration of man in the beginnings of the revolution, but they were to be disappointed. They were not influential, in guiding the course of the revolution. This is not saying that it would not have been better had they had more influence, but in the

light of facts alone, these people had no influence.

Even in a law-abiding nation like England, there have been numerous rebellions, sometimes on account of the religion which was being forced upon the people, and at other times owing to industrial conditions.

It is the man who has a comfortable bank account, a warm fire, and a full stomach who is contented with the government. The others rebel if they see an opportunity of bettering their conditions. A successful government is one which comes nearest to enabling its subjects to achieve the above mentioned conditions. There may be cited in opposition to this, the numerous instances of patriotism and devotion to country found among soldiers who have been recruited from among the poorer classes. It is a well known fact, that sometimes and often, a nation's best soldiers come from among its poorer classes, and its greatest leeches from among the richer classes. But invariably these poorer classes are not so poor as to be disaffected, while being leeches, is what has made the rich, rich.

A certain degree of hardship seems to be conducive to the greatest development of a patriotic spirit, but this hardship must never reach the point of actual hunger nor be the result of favoritism.

There is another manner in which nations are dependent on economical conditions. This is with regard to finances. A rich government can prosecute a war, which has the support of but few of its subjects, while it is difficult for a government without credit, to prosecute a popular war, and impossible for it to do so for any long period. A popular war is easily started. The people are enthusiastic and many enlist, but unless the war is successful from the start, the same ones who were the most enthusiastic are soon complaining, and unless there is a strong money credit, and a steady conservative ele-

ment in the population to fall back upon, the popular war will probably fail. It will fail except there is an economic basis for the war which the capital of the country believes important enough to be supported. Enthusiasm costs nothing and buys nothing, but war requires capital and labor.

Good examples of these conditions may be found in the history of any republic, where easily excited popular opinion may involve the nation in a war in spite of the advice of cooler heads. Then when the excitement has died down and taxes are levied, the war agitators become the complaining class. This is the limit of the accomplishment of unsupported enthusiasm. Unless the government can secure money it will fall. Fair examples of these conditions may be found in all the wars of our own country. The Revolutionary war was won on a purely economic basis. The economic grounds have since been rejuvenated into principles, and the rebels have become patriots. It is a fact, which can be brought out by close reading of history, that at the time of the Revolution, the rebels were condemned by many, because they did not have enough patriotism to bear a few slight taxes and other inconveniences out of pure love for their country. But they, as all free thinking people, didn't love their country unless their country treated them fairly, economically. They cared nothing for their social treatment. All the war spirit that was alive in the colonies during the winter at Valley Forge, was a little in the camp, which was fostered with care by a few great spirits, and nourished by money from a few capitalists who were confident of ultimate success. It was this money and not the enthusiasm which carried the army through that winter. Enthusiasm revived again, however, with the advent of warm weather and a few successful engagements, but enthusiasm is strong when armies are

strong, and weak when armies are weak. It is not to be depended upon. Capital, alone, will bolster up a defeated army.

After the war had been successfully concluded, the colonies would not form a responsible government until forced to do so by commercial conditions. Alexander Hamilton placed a strong prop under the youthful nation when he secured the adoption of a measure by which the national government agreed to pay the Revolutionary War debt and portions of the state debts. This might seem a rash step for a creditless government to take, but it operated favorably in that it immediately caused capitalists to become interested in the welfare of the new nation. As long as the new nation depended upon popular opinion and sympathy for its support, it was weak indeed, but so soon as economic factors became interested in its perpetuation, it became stable.

Many more instances like the above might be cited, but it is not necessary. A resume of historical facts is foreign to the purpose of this discussion. It is intended merely to find, as nearly as possible, the true value which should be placed upon economic influences in the history of man. It would be idle to maintain that the economic factors are of supreme importance, and it is equally idle to say that they have no importance. The contention herein made is, that the economical influences are directly responsible for all the fundamental changes occurring in the history of man. The first advance which a nation makes, is economic. Before the arts and sciences are developed, the industrial conditions must be such that the people are not entirely occupied in procuring sustenance. The modern government is for the benefit of the people and not the people for the benefit of the government. A more general realization of this fact would help greatly towards giving currency to the theory of economic interpretation. When subjects were the property of the government, the

economic influences were noticed only as they caused the rise or fall of Kings, and these events were frequently ascribed to the personality of the Kings. The successful King was the one who understood the economic conditions in his kingdom, and who worked in accordance with them. In modern times statesmen study the economic conditions because the success of their administration is judged solely by the industrial conditions which mar or make it.

In conclusion it may be said that the economic influence in history may be compared to the steel frame of a modern building. It is not prominently noticeable, but it is the supporting element of the structure. Without the steel frame the buildings cannot stand, and without the proper economic conditions, nations cannot stand. It is as necessary for a nation to respond to its own economic conditions as for a business man to act in accordance with the economic laws governing his business.