

**VITAL PROBLEMS IN
SOCIAL
EVOLUTION**

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Vital problems in social evolution by Arthur M. Lewis

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ARTHUR M. LEWIS

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I.

THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF HISTORY.

That which distinguishes the last century from all preceding centuries more than anything else is the amazing development of positive science. The only thing that at all compares with it is the growth of machine industry.

This great growth of science has led Lester F. Ward to compare it to a prairie fire, "such as used to sweep across the mainly treeless, grassy plains of northern Iowa."

"Such a fire," says Ward, "with a front of ten to twenty miles would advance at a rate of five to ten miles an hour, consuming everything in its way. But the line of flame, which could be distinctly traced, especially in the night, to a great distance by the eye, was never straight, but in consequence of certain checks at one point and specially favorable conditions at another, it would present great irregularities. Long tongues of fire would be seen projecting far in advance of the main line, leaving narrow, unburned tracts between

them, and every other conceivable form of indentation and irregularity would mark the boundary of the advancing conflagration. Occasionally sparks, carried far in advance by the high wind which the fire alone was capable of generating, would ignite the grass some distance from the point from which it emanated, and temporary islands would be created. But if any one spot be watched, all these separate projections would be seen soon to join, and the wider sinuses to be swept along until the whole area in question was completely consumed, and the scene of operations transferred to a point far in advance where the same process was being repeated, and so on indefinitely. The whole country behind these rapidly advancing scenes would be black, the devouring flames not being prevented by any of their erratic performances from ultimately compassing their designs. * * * The progress of discovery, of science, and of knowledge and truth in the world generally, follows this same method, whatever department we may examine."

In applying this fine metaphor we are at once struck by its illustration of the "irregularity" of the advance of science. One part of the field of knowledge seems to have offered comparatively little resistance. This is the

region occupied by astronomy and physics. Here the advance has been made earlier and more rapidly than in other fields. Newton began a general illumination of it with his theory of gravitation, and Kant thrust out a great tongue of fire with his nebular hypothesis. Then the conflagration attacked another great expanse—biology. Here Lamarck, Darwin, Haeckel and a host of other illustrious men applied the torch and fed the flames which have revolutionized all our thinking. But there was one great tract which refused to burn, while the fires of truth blazed on either side and behind it. Here an impenetrable darkness prevailed. This tract we now call sociology—the field which embraces the phenomena of society.

There are two reasons why this area refused to burn. First, the complexity of the material making it almost incombustible; second, a large army of persons doing everything possible to prevent its being ignited. These interesting persons were quite willing that the fires should burn everywhere else and would even help their spread, but this one sacred area must be kept immune.

If any daring individual threw a burning faggot into this guarded domain some of these official protectors would rush to stamp it out,

while others would devote their attention to the offender.

To break through this Chinese wall men of exceptional capacity were required, and many, even of the strongest, were thwarted and ruined in their attempts.

But in the middle of the last century two men appeared who were, both by nature and training, pre-eminently fitted to invade this territory. Brow-beaten and buffeted as they were by the intellectual hirelings of an interested ruling class, by sheer strength of brain and tenacity of purpose they held their ground.

They lit a great flaming torch, and, in spite of all that could be done to hinder, they threw it far out and it fell in the very center of this area, consecrated to the ruling class; there it started an island of fire which refused to be extinguished, but grew and spread in all directions until today it illumines every path and by-way of human activity, and constitutes the foundation and superstructure both, of a true science of society. That torch is known as "the materialistic conception of history," and the two men were Karl Marx and Frederick Engels.

History has for its theme the life of man in society, and this, of course, includes the development of society itself. Thus a proper

understanding of history is the first necessity of sociology. The first and most important task of the sociologist is, therefore, to discover the fundamental law of social development.

Many unsuccessful attempts have been made to solve this problem of historical causation. The weakest of these is the one which proclaims religion as the keynote of progress.

All Socialist writers and many others agree that religion must be regarded as an effect of social movement rather than a cause. In "The Holy Family," Marx says of those who think the opposite: "Just as they separate the soul from the body, and themselves from the world, so they separate history from natural science and industry, so they find the birthplace of history not in the gross material production on earth, but in the misty cloud formation of heaven." And in his "Critique of Political Economy" he says: "It is very easy to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion."

If Marx and Engels, when speaking of the mode of production, etc., being the foundation of the political, juridical and intellectual superstructure of society, do not specifically name religion, it is not because it is not included, nor yet because they are afraid of the prejudices of the superstitious, but because they had