

THE SUN WORSHIPPER

There is a shrewd warning to be given to all people who are in revolt. And in the present state of things, I think all men are revolting in that sense; except a few who are revolting in the other sense. But the warning to Socialists and other revolutionaries is this: that as sure as fate, if they use any argument which is atheist or materialistic, that argument will always be turned against them at last by the tyrant and the slave. To-day I saw one too common Socialist argument turned Tory, so to speak, in a manner quite startling and insane. I mean that modern doctrine, taught, I believe, by most followers of Karl Marx, which is called the materialist theory of history. The theory is, roughly, this: that all the important things in history are rooted in an economic motive. In short, history is a science; a science of the search for food.

Now I desire, in passing only, to point out that this is not merely untrue, but actually the reverse of the truth. It is putting it too feebly to say that the history of man is not only economic. Man would not have any history if he were only economic. The need for food is certainly universal, so universal that it is not even human. Cows have an economic motive, and apparently (I dare not say what ethereal delicacies may be in a cow) only an economic motive. The cow eats grass anywhere and never eats anything else. In short, the cow does fulfill the materialist theory of history: that is why the cow has no history. "A History of Cows" would be one of the simplest and briefest of

standard works. But if some cows thought it wicked to eat long grass and persecuted all who did so; if the cow with the crumpled horn were worshipped by some cows and gored to death by others; if cows began to have obvious moral preferences over and above a desire for grass, then cows would begin to have a history. They would also begin to have a highly unpleasant time, which is perhaps the same thing.

The economic motive is not merely not inside all history; it is actually outside all history. It belongs to Biology or the Science of Life; that is, it concerns things like cows, that are not so very much alive. Men are far too much alive to get into the science of anything; for them we have made the art of history. To say that human actions have depended on economic support is like saying that they have depended on having two legs. It accounts for action, but not for such varied action; it is a condition, but not a motive; it is too universal to be useful. Certainly a soldier wins the Victoria Cross on two legs; he also runs away on two legs. But if our object is to discover whether he will become a V.C. or a coward the most careful inspection of his legs will yield us little or no information. In the same way a man will want food if he is a dreamy romantic tramp, and will want food if he is a toiling and sweating millionaire. A man must be supported on food as he must be supported on legs. But cows (who have no history) are not only furnished more generously in the matter of legs, but can see their food on a much grander and more imaginative scale. A cow can lift up her eyes to the hills and see uplands and peaks of pure food. Yet we never see the horizon broken by crags of cake or happy hills of cheese.

So far the cow (who has no history) seems to have every other advantage. But history—the whole point of history—precisely is that some two legged soldiers ran away while others, of similar anatomical structure, did not. The whole point of history precisely is: some people (like poets and tramps) chance getting money by disregarding it, while others (such as millionaires) will absolutely lose money for the fun of bothering about it. There would be no history if there were only economic history. All the historical events have been due to the twists and turns given to the economic instinct by forces that were not economic. For instance, this theory traces the French war of Edward III to a quarrel about the French wines. Any one who has even smelt the Middle Ages must feel fifty answers spring to his lips; but in this case one will suffice. There would have been no such war, then, if we all drank water like cows. But when one is a man one enters the world of historic choice. The act of drinking wine is one that requires explanation. So is the act of not drinking wine.

But the capitalist can get much more fun out of the doctrine.

When strikes were splitting England right and left a little while ago, an ingenious writer, humorously describing himself as a Liberal, said that they were entirely due to the hot weather. The suggestion was eagerly taken up by other creatures of the same kind, and I really do not see why it was not carried farther and applied to other lamentable uprisings in history. Thus, it is a remarkable fact that the weather is

generally rather warm in Egypt; and this cannot but throw a light on the sudden and mysterious impulse of the Israelites to escape from captivity. The English strikers used some barren republican formula (arid as the definitions of the medieval schoolmen), some academic shibboleth about being free men and not being forced to work except for a wage accepted by them. Just in the same way the Israelites in Egypt employed some dry scholastic quibble about the extreme difficulty of making bricks with nothing to make them of. But whatever fantastic intellectual excuses they may have put forward for their strange and unnatural conduct in walking out when the prison door was open, there can be no doubt that the real cause was the warm weather. Such a climate notoriously also produces delusions and horrible fancies, such as Mr. Kipling describes. And it was while their brains were disordered by the heat that the Jews fancied that they were founding a nation, that they were led by a prophet, and, in short, that they were going to be of some importance in the affairs of the world.

Nor can the historical student fail to note that the French monarchy was pulled down in August; and that August is a month in summer.

In spite of all this, however, I have some little difficulty myself in accepting so simple a form of the Materialist Theory of History (at these words all Marxian Socialists will please bow their heads three times), and I rather think that exceptions might be found to the principle. Yet it is not chiefly such exceptions that embarrass my belief in it.

No; my difficulty is rather in accounting for the strange coincidence by which the shafts of Apollo split us exclusively along certain lines of class and of economics. I cannot understand why all solicitors did not leave off soliciting, all doctors leave off doctoring, all judges leave off judging, all benevolent bankers leave off lending money at high interest, and all rising politicians leave off having nothing to add to what their right honourable friend told the House about eight years ago. The quaint theoretic plea of the workers, that they were striking because they were ill paid, seems to receive a sort of wild and hazy confirmation from the fact that, throughout the hottest weather, judges and other persons who are particularly well paid showed no disposition to strike. I have to fall back therefore on metaphysical fancies of my own; and I continue to believe that the anger of the English poor (to steal a phrase from Sir Thomas Browne) came from something in man that is other than the elements and that owes no homage unto the sun.

When comfortable people come to talking stuff of that sort, it is really time that the comfortable classes made a short summary and confession of what they have really done with the very poor Englishman. The dawn of the mediaeval civilisation found him a serf; which is a different thing from a slave. He had security; although the man belonged to the land rather than the land to the man. He could not be evicted; his rent could not be raised. In practice, it came to something like this: that if the lord rode down his cabbages he had not much chance of redress; but he had the chance of growing more cabbages. He had direct access to the

means of production.

Since then the centuries in England have achieved something different; and something which, fortunately, is perfectly easy to state. There is no doubt about what we have done. We have kept the inequality, but we have destroyed the security. The man is not tied to the land, as in serfdom; nor is the land tied to the man, as in a peasantry. The rich man has entered into an absolute ownership of farms and fields; and (in the modern industrial phrase) he has locked out the English people. They can only find an acre to dig or a house to sleep in by accepting such competitive and cruel terms as he chooses to impose.

Well, what would happen then, over the larger parts of the planet, parts inhabited by savages? Savages, of course, would hunt and fish. That retreat for the English poor was perceived; and that retreat was cut off. Game laws were made to extend over districts like the Arctic snows or the Sahara. The rich man had property over animals he had no more dreamed of than a governor of Roman Africa had dreamed of a giraffe. He owned all the birds that passed over his land: he might as well have owned all the clouds that passed over it. If a rabbit ran from Smith's land to Brown's land, it belonged to Brown, as if it were his pet dog. The logical answer to this would be simple: Any one stung on Brown's land ought to be able to prosecute Brown for keeping a dangerous wasp without a muzzle.

Thus the poor man was forced to be a tramp along the roads and to sleep

in the open. That retreat was perceived; and that retreat was cut off. A landless man in England can be punished for behaving in the only way that a landless man can behave: for sleeping under a hedge in Surrey or on a seat on the Embankment. His sin is described (with a hideous sense of fun) as that of having no visible means of subsistence.

The last possibility, of course, is that upon which all human beings would fall back if they were sinking in a swamp or impaled on a spike or deserted on an island. It is that of calling out for pity to the passerby. That retreat was perceived; and that retreat was cut off. A man in England can be sent to prison for asking another man for help in the name of God.

You have done all these things, and by so doing you have forced the poor to serve the rich, and to serve them on the terms of the rich. They have still one weapon left against the extremes of insult and unfairness: that weapon is their numbers and the necessity of those numbers to the working of that vast and slavish machine. And because they still had this last retreat (which we call the Strike), because this retreat was also perceived, there was talk of this retreat being also cut off.

Whereupon the workmen became suddenly and violently angry; and struck at your Boards and Committees here, there, and wherever they could. And you opened on them the eyes of owls, and said, "It must be the sunshine." You could only go on saying, "The sun, the sun." That was what the man in Ibsen said, when he had lost his wits.