

LESSONS OF HISTORY

IN his *Civilization on Trial** Professor Arnold J. Toynbee has presented a number of historical essays under such headings as "My View of History," "Does History Repeat Itself?" "Encounters between Civilisations," "The Meaning of History for the Soul," etc. The subjects are approached from an elevated standpoint and there is abundant evidence of wide knowledge and extensive research. The author claims that the book has a unity of aim and idea, but perhaps because of the method of treatment this is not very clear to the ordinary reader. It is not until page 222, for example, that the author indicates what he means by civilisation, and his definition: "the smallest unit of historical study at which one arrives when one tries to understand the history of one's country," is not likely to leave a clear impression of the essential nature of the subject.

The author's outlook is not cynical or destructive; he does not quarrel with the spirit of the universe; and he insists on the advantage of classical studies. Yet, as one rises from reading his work it is difficult to give a satisfactory answer in one's own mind to the question: what exactly is his message for the average person striving to do his part in strengthening our civilisation or, at least, everything in it which is sound? From a leading historian, Director of Studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs and Research Professor of International History in London University, with all the access to material and leisure for the task which these positions imply, more might have been expected. There is much, no doubt, to interest the speculator in the realm of intangible abstractions, but little to guide any active reformer in making decisions in those practical matters which can lead directly to the elevation of humanity.

We are told "the regular pattern of social disintegration is a schism of the disintegrating society into a recalcitrant proletariat and a less and less effectively dominant minority." This means, surely, that as the means of subsistence become increasingly under the control of a wealthy few or a centralised bureaucracy the people become dissatisfied. We do not need to pay historians to tell us this. The reformer wants evidence to show why this concentration takes place. Thus the fortunes of any civilisation cannot be explained until we know something of the economic laws which man must obey before he can keep himself alive, much less indulge in historical speculation.

On this subject all that Professor Toynbee can say seems to be, that to be saved "In economics, we must find working compromises (varying according to practical requirements of different places and times) between free enterprise and socialism."

No evidence is advanced to prove the implication that the rights of society necessarily conflict with the rights of the individual. And it does not help us when we are told that the increased prosperity of the English working classes in the middle of the last century was due only to factory acts, trades unions and the vote. Free Trade and mechanical discovery had only negligible influence, apparently, on improvement.

In one passage Professor Toynbee implies that every historian must be influenced by the time in which he happens to live. He does not consider whether the

historian's views might not also be influenced by the material circumstances in which he happens to live. At all periods of his history man has been obliged to subsist either by applying his own labour to things of the earth, or by somehow obtaining the proceeds of the labour of others. Hence, at all periods of history the great mass of men must be concerned in getting a living before they can develop any opinions about political or social movements. These innumerable struggles of the multitude have never been given due prominence in comparison with the activities of those more sheltered from their influence. With no disrespect to historians we suggest that this disparity must always unconsciously influence their speculations and obscure the importance of considerations which might be all-important to the solution of historical and social problems. No one who has not lived and worked for considerable periods with peoples and classes different from their own can realise the extent to which circumstances affect one's outlook; no one who has not experienced real poverty can fully understand its inevitable influence upon the feelings of ordinary men. Even when the State relieves such poverty by mechanical redistribution or artificial protection, those protected must be concerned more with striving for political power as an artificial means to material welfare than with considering abstract ideas, or even religion.

If, before presuming to judge problems of civilisation, we first consider the essential conditions within which man must supply his material needs and desires—and keep these conditions constantly before us—we are likely to make more progress than by starting with abstractions which, in effect, place the cart before the horse. And the first of these conditions is that man must have access to the earth before he can apply any of his labour to his subsistence, or co-operate with others for the same purpose. And it is useful to remember that civilisation has been described as co-operation.

Applying this knowledge to the factors which cause the rise and fall of civilisation, we find that in primitive conditions, where men live directly from the land and co-operation extends only to the small group such as the family or tribe, although there is no great accumulation of wealth either collectively or individually there is none of the disparity which we call poverty, and there are no social revolutions.

As co-operation extends, wealth increases and—assuming that mutual defence of justice does not keep pace—more plunder can be obtained. As civilisation becomes more complex it becomes possible to consolidate perpetual plunder by legislation which the masses eventually fail to recognise. And the first and easiest step has always been by appropriating land. "The first who, having enclosed a piece of ground, had the idea of saying, 'This is mine,' and found people simple enough to believe it," says Rousseau, "was the real founder of civil society" and, he might have added, the originator of a proletariat."

If any amateur historian cares to investigate for himself he can find abundant evidence—often in chance references of other historians—to show that it is on this original method of plunder that other methods have been built and a dissatisfied proletariat produced.

We recommend this line of investigation to any historian who is seeking a clue to the causes of the decline of civilisations. It seems to have escaped Professor Toynbee's notice altogether.

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