

STUDIES IN SOCIOLOGY.

Progress and Poverty in Japan.*

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PART I.

Of late the attention of Europe has been more and more attracted toward the Far East. In that, to us remote, quarter of the Globe, new factors have arisen which must necessarily greatly influence the future history of the world. For the first time in history, an Eastern nation has voluntarily turned to the West to seek instruction and to draw upon its store of knowledge. Hence, for the first time, we have an Eastern nation not only prepared to defend itself against Western aggression, to meet all possible enemies on a footing of equality, but also determined to exploit its own natural resources and its own labour force for its own benefit, and eagerly anxious not only to manufacture to supply its own wants, but to compete against all comers for the command of the great Eastern and Tropical markets, the control of the trade of which has long been a source of discord amongst the commercial nations of the West. Like Pallas Athene of old, the goddess of Armed Resistance as well as of Knowledge, Japan seems suddenly to have sprung into existence armed at all points, fully equipped to take her due place amongst the nations. Moreover, in the light of recent events, we cannot doubt but that the awakening of Japan will necessarily be followed by a similar awakening in China, a result the far-reaching effects of which cannot easily be over-estimated.

THE GREAT AWAKENING.

Some thirty-five years ago, Japan was still an isolated, " hermit " country, jealous and suspicious of foreigners, as of foreign habits and customs, proud of its isolation and seclusion—its inhabitants strictly forbidden to leave its shores without express permission, under pain of severe punishment. Suddenly all this was changed. Ancient traditions and venerable institutions were voluntarily

abandoned, at least for a time; Japanese statesmen were sent to the west to study the different forms of government and social laws and institutions prevailing there; thousands of young intelligent Japanese students were sent thither to study its methods of production, to acquire knowledge of the multifarious means by which the mysterious forces of nature had been harnessed into its service. With the result that in Japan the indigenous Feudal System has been swept away, and a new Constitution, avowedly based upon European models, has been set up; a semblance of representative parliamentary government has been created ; a numerous, well armed, well disciplined, and well trained army, and a powerful, well equipped navy, both inspired by the keenest national and patriotic sentiment, have been called into being; the use of machinery, electricity, and steam power has been generally introduced ; new methods of production and industry have been established; engineering works, cotton mills, match factories, and so on, on a large scale, furnished with the most modern machinery, directed by well trained minds, have everywhere sprung into existence; and railways, tramways, telegraphs, telephones, &c., have been multiplied with more than American rapidity. To-day, as the result of some thirty-five years' unremitting energy and continuous activity, Japan can claim to be in possession of all the material advantages of our Western civilisation. But, like the countries on whose knowledge and methods she has drawn so freely, Japan seems to have yet to realise, to use some of the earliest published words of Henry George, that "the character of a people counts for more than their numbers, and that the distribution of wealth is even a far more important matter than its production."

ANOTHER ONE-SIDED CIVILISATION.

Like the Western civilisation, on which it is now modelled, the Japanese civilisation threatens to become essentially a partial, one-sided, lop sided civilisation—securing the possibility of leisure and enjoyment, of mental, moral, and spiritual development to a limited section of the community —degrading, impoverishing, and crushing beneath its weight those by whose labour it has to be supported. Owing to causes yet to be elucidated, the recent prodigious economic development of Japan, like that of Europe and America, has not tended to advantage, to enrich and to elevate all, but only some. Those who were previously rich and powerful— the privileged few—it has made richer and more powerful; those who were previously poor and dependent—the disinherited masses—it has made poorer and more dependent. Owing to already existing

social or economic conditions, the increased wealth at the command of the community, due to improved methods of production, does not distribute itself equitably amongst all the co-operating workers, but gravitates into the coffers of the privileged classes. To gain some insight into the causes to which these effects are due, we must briefly consider the social conditions prevailing in Japan prior to the great changes we have already briefly indicated.

PAST AND PRESENT.

Students of Japanese history will find in it a striking resemblance to that of almost every kingdom of Western Europe, more especially, perhaps, to that of France. The social conditions prevailing prior to the great change—the Japanese Revolution of 1868—were much the same as those prevailing in Europe prior to the great French Revolution of 1788. On the one hand, a few rich, powerful, practically despotic, territorial magnates—the dai/nios—some owning large territories, comprising even many provinces, others, only a few square miles ; on the other hand, a vast population of disinherited, down-trodden, miserable serfs, whose lives, liberties, and possessions were practically at the mercy of the caprices of the tyrant who happened to be lord over the land and villages in which they dwelt. Between these two extremes, there was a sort of middle class, composed of a small number of independent yeomen, or free men in the old sense of the term (called goshi), who owned no allegiance to any lord ; a military class, commonly known as the samurai, who were the retainers or clansmen of the great nobles, and who held their land in return for military services; and, lastly, a comparatively few artizans and traders of different degrees. For many centuries the country has been governed, in the name of the Mikado, who reigned but governed not, by a sort of hereditary Prime Minister, or Shogun, generally the head—the daimio —of the special clan who, for the time being, was most powerful or best organised. A sort of Feudal System had been established, and the whole country had been parcelled out into numerous fiefs, nominally under the control of the Central Government, but practically forming so many independent kingdoms, over which the chief or heads of the ruling clan, the daimio, was the hereditary ruler, and the rest of the clan the hereditary councillors (karos), and other officials of different ranks. To-day, though their ancient privileges have been abolished, the old feudal clans, who form the aristocracy of Japan, still remain the most important factors of the political and economic situation in Japan. It was owing to their efforts that the power of the Shogun was swept away, and the Mikado restored to his ancient sovereignty ; it

was owing to their initiative that Western civilisation has been introduced into the country. They comprise the large as well as most of the small territorial magnates, and as a natural consequence the economic changes they have promoted have made of them the leading and most powerful industrial and commercial "capitalists." Behind the appearance of parliamentary government, the political and governing power is still practically in their hands. They make and unmake Ministeries, they determine legislation, and the public offices are filled with their retainers and adherents. Thus behind the veil of constitutional government, Japan to-day still remains governed by an aristocracy or an oligarchy. However, as M. Andre Siegfried tells us, "It is only fair to add that in most cases the influence of the aristocracy has been excellent. They played a considerable part in the economic transformation of their country. To-day, as in England, the most powerful Lords are interested in the principal industrial and commercial enterprises, and their power makes itself felt as much in the economic domain as in the Parliament or in the Government offices (au Ministere). It is necessary to take note of this double role of the aristocracy, as in studying the social and economic development of Japan we shall often have to remind ourselves that it is the rich and noble who are in power, and then we shall be able to understand why it is that the Japanese Government, so enterprising in other directions, has hitherto been so indifferent, so opposed, to what we should call social reforms."

(To be Continued).