

PRIEST and PROLETARIANS in PREHISTORIC TIMES

The Origin of Magic and Religion, pp. 212 (1923), and

The Growth of Civilization, pp. 224, with 8 maps (1924). Methuen and Co., 4s. 6d. each.

MR. W. J. PERRY, who is reader in cultural anthropology in the University of London, sets forth pleasantly in these two moderately-priced volumes how far back in human history class divisions reach, how from the earliest times religion has been the instrument of ruling classes for the attainment of dynastic ends, and how throughout historic times the common people have been mere pawns in the game of priests and kings. For these reasons his books deserve careful study by PLEBS readers and students.

But Mr. Perry goes much further. His books purport to relate exactly how ruling classes originated and why men began to fight. His conclusions on these points vitally affect sociological theory. They have been hailed with enthusiasm by the believers in primitive communism and other fancies which present in new garb the biblical doctrine of the fall of man. And just because our author's speculations in this sphere are so attractive it behoves students to scrutinise with care the whole structure of the new anthropology and sociology set out in these volumes. Mr. Perry's position is presented as a reasoned whole in which his special thesis on war and government depends upon his general theory of the growth of civilisations and religions.

The general theory is briefly something like this:—We begin in the Old Stone Age with a world of food gatherers—hunters and fishers. Subsequently there arose first in the Nile Valley and then in the adjoining regions of Western Asia and South Eastern Europe food producing communities based upon irrigation, worshipping a Great Mother goddess and

all allegedly closely related. Still later, the Egyptians began sending out expeditions in search of gold and precious stones to which life-giving properties were attributed. Thus colonies characterised by the erection of great stone graves and megalithic monuments were planted in Western Europe, India, the Pacific and Central America, and they constitute the "archaic civilisation." Finally the ruling class of the archaic civilisation ejected adventurers who organised on the borders of the old communities half civilised warrior States who eventually destroyed the parent organism.

In support of this theory Mr. Perry has erected an imposing edifice of "facts" drawn from various parts of the world and from several branches of science. The stability of his whole structure is dependent upon the solidity of the component "facts," but no single individual can expect to be a master of all the specialised knowledge needed to test the structure, and the layman must be overwhelmed by the vast array of "facts" so laboriously collected and ingeniously pitted together.

Yet, when we turn to the specialists, we find that Professor Peet has undermined the very foundations of Mr. Perry's structure by exposing his Egyptological "facts" as precarious speculations,* and a distinguished Americanist has revealed the key stones of Mr. Perry's arches as mere hollow plaster.† In my own sphere, the prehistory of Europe, I discover that the lower courses of Mr. Perry's building are of the flimsiest material. Perhaps I may instance one or two points to illustrate the nature of our author's "facts" so far as I can test them.

On I. p. 63, we are told that the cultivation of cereals was introduced into England by small, brown-skinned

**Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 1924 part I.
†*Ibid.*, part II.

(sic), long-skulled men. But we know these people quite well. We have examined hundreds of their tombs and their skulls and, as far as a negative can be proved, we are sure that they did not cultivate grains. The first traces of cultivated plants and a cereal diet are associated with quite different invaders, tall and short-skulled, who came from Central Europe.

Twice (1) p. 89 and (2) p. 158 we read that corbelled beehive tombs were spread from Crete to the Orkneys by Children of the Sun who came to power in Egypt at the beginning of the 5th dynasty, i.e., 2680 B.C., that (2) they were modelled on pyramids of the 12th dynasty (2000—1788 B.C.), that (3) they reached Crete about 2200 B.C., and that (4) they were characterised by a profuse use of gold ornaments. But the statements (1) and (2) seem to contradict one another; the tombs in question begin in Crete some 800 years earlier than Mr. Perry supposes, and as far as our islands are concerned, not one corbelled tomb in England, Wales or Scotland—and many have been explored—ever yielded a trace of gold or any other metal! I will not weary the reader by other instances of more excusable mis-statements to show the number of minor inaccuracies by which Mr. Perry's "facts" are enabled to fit together to form a seemingly coherent structure. When the necessary corrections have been made the framework of the whole is found to be very shaky.

Remembering this, let us go on to scrutinise the superstructure. Among the food gatherers, we hear, a state of peace and communism reigned. Even the first food producers co-operated freely and voluntarily in agricultural labours and the building of canals. But they needed a calendar for their irrigation which some genius in Egypt invented. As a reward, the inventor's family was raised to a position of "privilege" and he became the founder of a royal line (p. 31). Among the royal "privileges" was that of dying for his people; for the early kings were sacrificed to make the crops grow (p. 29). However, a wily priest of Heliopolis discovered that the king need not himself be sacrificed; a slave

would do instead. "Henceforth the king had power over his subjects (sic), and was no longer forced to sacrifice himself for the good of the community. It is in this episode that many of the troubles probably take their origin." Wars, ruling castes and their heavenly counterparts began from that instant. As all this is pure inference, we cannot expect Mr. Perry to say when it happened, but he does incidentally date the next step in the consolidation of royal power. A dead king, Osiris, became a real immortal god through his connection with mummification (p. 32). He was the prototype of all gods; for previously men had worshipped only the Great Mother, and perhaps her mortal spouse. Now mummification began not earlier than 3300 B.C., so that real gods should not have existed before that date. Yet the Sumerians in Mesopotamia were building temples to gods about 4000 B.C.! The final apotheosis of the kingship in Egypt came once more with aid of priestcraft in 2680 B.C., when the Pharaoh became himself an incarnate god, the Son of the Sun.

Mr. Perry asserts firmly that all ruling groups were and still are descended from those of Egypt. All, with the exception of those of the old mother-goddess communities who were derived from the earlier Egyptian dynasties belonged and belong still to the line of Children of the Sun. The States of the archaic civilisation were Egyptian colonies planted by Children of the Sun. The warrior peoples who arose on their borders and eventually destroyed them were the work of nobles and princes who, unable to find scope for their ruling talent at home, set out from the parent community and imposed themselves as rulers on peoples of more lowly culture. So we had the two varieties of class States, and two varieties of militarism arose therefrom.

The food gatherers were peaceable folk, and so, according to Mr. Perry, were the earliest cultivators. The first wars were concerned with securing victims to be sacrificed instead of the king, but the ruling classes were thereby educated in cruel behaviour. Then, when military leaders detached them-

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selves from the communities of the archaic civilisation, their rapacity was unrestrained, and they lived by war and plunder.

So much of this structure is speculation that an exact test cannot be imposed, but some points must be noted. The food-gatherers were probably peaceful, but they lived in no Golden Age. Life was a continuous and precarious struggle for food, and when game was scarce the food-gatherers who survived in East Sweden even into the New Stone Age had recourse to human flesh.

The pacificism and equality of early cultivators is more doubtful. The Sumerian city states, though they excelled in the arts of peace, used to engage in most blood-thirsty wars long before the "archaic civilisation" was even beginning, and long before Sargon of Akkad. But Mr. Perry's account of the genesis of the warrior states can be tested by historical events to which he himself appeals, and appears under scrutiny as neither consistent nor accurate.

He relates that the warrior peoples were purely parasitic and drew their sustenance from the civilised states. After a long period of education through contact with the higher civilisations, these warriors descended upon and dominated the latter (II, p. 140). But since their rulers were, on Mr. Perry's thesis, themselves sprung from the ruling classes of the "archaic civilisation" (II, p. 175) and so presumably in possession of its culture,

why was this long process of "education" needed by contact?

And Mr. Perry has absolutely misconceived the nature of this process of "education." Among the warrior peoples whom he cites, are the Teutons who overthrew the Roman Empire, the Aryan Dorians who destroyed the Minoan civilisation of Greece and the Kassites who overran Babylonia about 1760 B.C. But the Teutons were educated by being brought as slaves to Rome and hired as mercenaries for the Roman armies. Which were the parasites, the Teutonic slaves and mercenaries, or the Romans who exploited their strength and their prowess? The Dorians were prehistoric, but Professor Chadwick, whom our author often quotes with approval, has adduced reasons for believing that the relation of the Aryan tribes to the Minoans was similar to that described. In any case, the Kassites appear in the Babylonian records first as slaves and mercenaries, later as conquerors and dynasts.

We should be cautious about pinning our faith to a theory founded on such dubious promises, and supported by so many fictitious facts.

Mr. Perry's books are well worth reading; even to the specialist they are suggestive and illuminating; to the socialist they provide a store house of useful ammunition; but let sentimentalists beware of relying on their conclusions.

V. GORDON CHILDE.

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