

GEOGRAPHICAL FACTS AND PROLET CULTURAL FASHIONS

THERE were half a dozen fights rolling merrily through the columns of the May PLEBS, and as though that wasn't enough for a tanner, the Editor added a lament that nobody had "gone for" Archbold on the subject of his little geographical excursion of a month earlier. This is, of course, quite as it should be; and as it looks as though I shall have to take my stand in the queue before I can get a slice off the reckless and ruthless Postgate, I must in a spirit of fraternal joy ask Archbold to allow me a little practice at his expense.

There is a connection between them, because each in a different way has raised the question of what we are driving at—what exactly we include under the name "Proletcult." That ugly word (I cannot make myself like it) does not signify that we believe the Proletariat to possess an elaborated standard of morals and a complete apparatus of learning, which it is our special mission to impart in homœopathic doses to such as have the grace to accept our ministrations. It means that we have taken in hand the elaboration of a world-concept valid in general and in detail from the proletarian point of view; and, further, the development of the understanding thereof in minds prepared for its reception by the emotions and experiences resulting from their proletarian relation to things and institutions.

We have to develop positively a view of man and the universe of superior validity to that of the bourgeoisie, capable of more consistent practical application and far more universal and inclusive in its scope. And we have to communicate this to the greatest possible number of proletarians in order that it may serve as an intellectual tool for the creation of a new order of things.

When the defenders of the existing order charge us with being "prejudiced" or "partial," we are no more disturbed than we should be if they accused us of being conditioned by gravitation or of taking food with our meals. We are prejudiced as they are, partisan even as they; with this difference only—we *understand* alike the fact and the relative importance of the bias which sways us. The bourgeois theoretician, at best, allows for a personal bias. He has no conception of and makes no allowance for *class*-bias, or for prejudice in favour of an established order of society. His prejudices, being unsuspected, use him—ours, being known and understood, are tools that we use.

It does not follow that everything said by a bourgeois is necessarily wrong, or that everything said by a proletarian must of necessity be right. To suppose so would be to surrender to the very bourgeois illusion of finality we are fighting against. A proletarian may be, and generally is, tinged with bourgeois superstitions, a bourgeois may (and frequently does when gifted with originality) blunder unconsciously upon proletarian truths. Generally the difference arises not so much in the field of speculation as in that of practical application of formulated theories. The bourgeois is apt to think any theory *must* be wrong if it runs counter to current institutions. Contrariwise he has a way, when he does open up a new path, of explaining away its newness in order to pacify the fears of the timorously conservative, and of fitting the facts into the framework of an established conception.

Fairgrieve, for example, perceives, as all men do more or less, a connection between the rise of States and certain forces not under the control of the Governments thereof. He follows up the clue and sees in the natural distribution of sunlight and moisture, and of the animal and vegetable life they make possible, a basis for race distribution. He sees in the natural facilities for intercourse—well-watered plains, mountain passes, rivers, inland seas, and outer oceans—a natural basis for points of contact between differentiated cultures and States. He sees that in a period of commercial intercourse facility of commodity production depends at any rate in part upon ease of access to raw materials; and, seeing all this, sets it out in a book.

So far he has proceeded in sound, scientific and positively materialist fashion; but, faced with the problem of presenting his case, his bourgeois preconceptions come into play. With the facts before him which show that Man's relation to Nature determines his relation to his fellow men, and that this latter relation involves social differentiations and antagonisms which in turn determine forms of government and the scope of States, he can see only the two ends of the process—Nature and the State. Hence his book appears as *Geography and World Power*, or, in other words, How Geography decided the Rise of the British Empire, and how those who strive against it are fighting in the teeth of Nature's decree. An older generation would have traced the descent of the aboriginal Briton from Noah and shown from Scripture that God designed the British Empire to set forth his power and his glory.

We, who see in the State a temporary form of the machinery of social government—one born of class antagonisms and doomed to pass—can afford to be lenient to Fairgrieve and his illusions, because his prejudices are refuted by the very facts he has himself collected. What we cannot afford to do is to dismiss his work with contempt simply because its title and phrasing are not exactly to our liking. To do that, as Archbold does, is to "empty out the baby with the bath water." If we are to wait before learning anything until our reading matter has survived the scrutiny of a committee of severe-minded Marxists we shall, I fear, wake up one morning to find that the ill-mannered proletariat has accomplished its emancipation without waiting for our ultra-righteous selves.

Suppose it be true that the subject matter of Fairgrieve's book is as much economics as geography—what then? Does that prove that Economic Geography—the concrete study of the earth as a manifold display

of economic potentialities—is a study of no worth? In our ordinary economics courses we, being concerned with the general laws and conditions of commodity production, make abstraction from all the innumerable concrete differences of price, of soils, sites, and climatic conditions. When elucidating the law of value, the functions of money, and the general law of accumulation, we are concerned only incidentally with these differences. But when we pass to the application of these general laws to particular cases at once the concrete differences and variations become vastly important.

Marxism is first, last, and all the time an historical conception. It sees every thought and everything as the product of a process involving action and reaction throughout all its multiple details. We must, of course, observe some sense of proportion in our studies. Twenty years devoted solely to a study of the *gens* among Kelts and Germans, or the Administrations of Ancient Akkad, would be overdoing it. All the same, *some* knowledge of the past is necessary—how much depends upon circumstances. Even Archbold is familiar enough with ancient Carthage to use it as an illustration (inaccurately by the way!). The culmination of capitalism can only be understood in the light of its whole history, and its special peculiarities by contrast with preceding epochs. There must be proportion, but a Proletcult teacher can hardly know too much.

Upon the question of "Revisionist" geography and Archbold's objection thereto I shall, in charity, say little. The *old* geography used to divide the earth by *frontier lines* and study it piecemeal as a mere matter of space relations; the *newer* geography introduced us to the conception of *regions* determined by differences of rainfall, sunlight, prevailing winds and natural products. The *newest* geography views the earth as a whole, differentiated by its varying social potentialities—hygienic, commercial, economic and strategical. Quite obviously the completeness of the work of this school will depend upon the quality of the economics and sociology possessed by the geographer; but it is equally obvious that the whole school have (albeit unconsciously) landed themselves on the threshold of Marxism.

"In making their livelihood together," says Marx, "men enter into certain necessary definite relations; relations which *do not depend upon their wills*, but which correspond to and grow out of whatever stage has been reached in the development of the material productive forces of Nature." It is, in a sense, true (as Archbold insists) that man has brought geographical conditions "under his control," yet the need so to bring them was a fact of prime importance, and the need to keep them so remains as a permanent conditioning social fact now and henceforward. The geographical fact that Britain is an island has not the *same* significance to-day as in the past; but it has as much significance, though of a different *kind*. To escape dependence upon home climatic influences we must produce things which for *natural* and social reasons others find a difficulty in producing; and to effect the exchange of goods for food we must negotiate successfully all sorts of natural difficulties. It is hardly true to say that "most of the geographical controls are now under man's control." True, instead of freezing to death or contracting pneumonia at the dictates of the "brave North-Easter" we can put on overcoats and survive. But the overcoat is there to remind us that the *need* to do certain things, make

such and such, and wear so and so, is created not by our wills but by the forces of Nature that we like to think we are "bossing."

Nobody can possibly study any aspect of social development without a knowledge, the fuller the better, of the earth from which man emerged, upon which he depends, and to which he will return when at long last he (ceasing to bother about theories or issues, and from inability to consume losing all connection with economics) becomes once again a mere geographical incident.

I agree cordially that we want more and better work upon modern history. But are we likely to get it if we regard so much of Marx as has been translated into English as the whole Law and the Prophets which it were blasphemy to add to or extend? There is good proletarian work to be done in the way of assimilating and rearranging the materials gathered by even the bourgeois giants of learning, which is after all just what Marx and Engels, being sensible men, did themselves.

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