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MATERIALISM SPECIALLY LOOKED AT FROM THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POINT OF VIEW.

By Dr. WILLIAM MARTIN.

Scientifically speaking, materialism is the explanation of social phenomena based exclusively on economic grounds. According to the materialistic theory, the whole complex of social relations could be explained through the satisfaction of some material requirement. Need would be the only aim and the only law of human societies; the development of technics would be the only explanation of social evolution and of the changes brought in the course of time in the judicial and social intercourse individuals hold with one another.

The best known amongst materialistic schools is the Socialist school, which sees in Karl Marx's works a real gospel. However, it is a mistake to believe, as some people do, that the Socialistic school is the only one which attempted to find in economic causes the explanations of social intercourse.

Materialism is not exclusively a Socialistic and revolutionary doctrine. The Marxist theory borrowed from the inquiry into economic phenomena certain ideas and certain conjectures. Others, for instance the Frenchman Le Play, known for his Catholic and Conservative tendencies, drew from the very same phenomena conclusions which are just the reverse of those drawn by Marx; this, by the way, proves that determinism does not determine anything at all, and that determinism is subject to the fancy of the mind, which it denies. Conversely, Socialism is not necessarily materialism, and it is quite possible to find the foundation for active, nay, for audacious social politics in totally different explanations of social phenomena. Materialism and Socialism are therefore not identical.

Many an attempt has been made to criticize or even to refute this doctrine. It has been shown that economic phenomena, although they may explain parts of social reality, cannot explain it as a whole, and that the very same phenomena have produced in different societies contrary consequences. It has also been shown that similar social facts have possibly resulted from different causes, and that the fatalism some people imbibed from the observation of parallel economic and social phenomena had no real base either in science or in experience.

We shall, therefore, not recur to this question. But, if it is no longer necessary to refute economic materialism in its theory, it may, however, be useful, basing our argument on present facts, to show its social consequences and to unmask the sophism which would pretend that the uninterrupted growth of material prosperity and the unlimited improvement of technical industry would be sufficient in themselves to assure, in time, the future and the duration of society.

We are witnessing, to-day, the realization of the predictions made in 1818 by a great English captain of industry and bold social reformer, Robert Owen, who may be considered as one of the forerunners of international labour legislation. In a memorandum, which he submitted to the Sovereigns and Ministers assembled at Aix-la-Chapelle, he argued that the development of machinery would cause a dangerous excess of production in comparison with the needs of the community.

The excess of production would cause a fall in prices, the infallible consequence of which would be an increase of demand. From the point of view of economics, the circle is complete: production creates demand, which again creates production. The more industry is able to produce, the more markets it can find. This paradox is true.

But, from the social point of view, what would be the result of this process? Demand creates need. We have no need, in the economic acceptance of this word, of goods the price of which is prohibitive. But, as soon as the price becomes low enough to enter the sphere of individual possibility, demand arises. And when, on account of economic causes, a product to which one was accustomed cannot be acquired any longer, the need subsists, in spite of the fact that its satisfaction may no longer be assured.

The result of this almost general fall of prices, of this increased demand, and of these indefinitely multiplied requirements was a general raising in the standard of life of the working classes in the course of the 19th century. This increase in civilization and comfort, this access of the proletariat to new commodities, the existence and the use of which they had up to then known nothing of, were characteristic facts of the last hundred years. Material comfort creates also moral needs. The same individuals who, when in great want, think only of their daily bread, or (which is worse) of their daily drink, will, when housed in decent dwellings and possessed of some savings, have a wider horizon; they may even, perhaps, develop a desire for more education. It is too much to say that, in this roundabout way (which, after all,

is not so very great a *détour*) compulsory education is a daughter of machinery.

Education, like machinery, is insatiable. Machines are being improved from day to day, and their capacity of production is always growing. A little learning always leads to a desire for more. Once launched on the stream of civilization, humanity sees its ambitions growing day by day; it tends irresistibly towards a wider social horizon, towards a higher standard of living.

But there is a limit to this continuous social ascent, and this limit is marked by the requirements of society itself. One cannot very well imagine a society in which everybody would be a Prime Minister or a University Professor. Wherever men are grouped together, there are requirements of a lower nature to be met. The minor trades, even those which may seem repulsive or unwholesome, have to be carried on; if not, society could not possibly subsist. It would come to an end automatically all the more quickly if a larger proportion of its members took to transcendental thinking. Therefore, if every member of the community shared the needs of a superior nature, either the inferior social functions would no longer be performed, or they would be performed by people discontented with their lot.

This is where we now stand. Evolution has given the working classes ever-growing needs, without, at the same time, placing at their disposal the possibility of satisfying them. It has widened their horizon, but does not allow them to behold, and even less to enter, the promised land. It has made them, in spite of all the progress, from hygiene to the cinema, dissatisfied people.

This crisis or dilemma is, no doubt, inseparable from the growing civilization, of whose comfort and intelligence we are so proud, and (I hasten to add) not without reason. It is the reverse of the gorgeous medal which the 19th century stamped after its own image, and which recounts the conquests of men over matter and of intelligence over the unknown. It reminds us of the fact that in this world suffering cannot be separated from life, and that there is no progress, however noble it may be, which does not involve pain. This menacing dilemma demands severe self-examination. Those material and moral miseries that beset us are the ransom paid for the good things we are enjoying.

We are sometimes moved to pity for the fate of the peasants of yore—*corvables et taillables*. And we fail to see that in attracting them to the towns to manufacture the goods which make our life more easy, we have made their own lives more bitter.

The rural exodus is indeed one of the most characteristic features of this crisis. In the days when peasants used to make for themselves the rudimentary articles for their daily use, when they ate their own produce, and when they blissfully ignored education, they cultivated their fields without any ulterior motive. To-day, what is the reason of their coming to town? It is essentially because they feel they must have an exchange of ideas. Solitude weighs more heavily on those who think than on those who instinctively repeat the same ancestral gesture for two thousand years. Peasants come to town because there are cinemas to be found there; and cinemas not only represent a direct enticement, but are also the symbol of civilization, of luxury, and of the agreeable advantages of association with other people.

The depopulation of the country raises the price of agricultural production, raises the cost of living, causes towns to be overcrowded, and creates unemployment. Its results are disastrous, but they are merely the logical consequences of the progress our fathers adored and which we also cannot help liking, because we feel the benefit of it.

The rural exodus may also be witnessed within the towns themselves. Subordinate callings are more and more deserted in favour of higher occupations. We often wonder why the wages of the unskilled labourer have been increasing so much in comparison with those of the skilled artisan. A common labourer is now nearly as well-paid as a trained mechanic. The latter again is tending to receive as high a salary as an "educated" man, if not higher. Some indignant people see in this the levelling and equalising action of syndicalism. This explanation, however, is too simple. The reasons for this phenomenon are manifold, but there is one that outweighs all the others and is too often ignored, viz., the fact that the number of skilled artisans has increased relatively to the number of labourers, and the number of 'clerical' employees has increased relatively to that of workmen. Compulsory education, technical schools and apprenticeship have diffused special knowledge, and the effects of the law of supply and demand have followed. Little by little, from place to place the social raising of the masses spread to the most cultivated classes, which could not rise any further, and thus were unable to find a higher compensation to offset the loss of the lower. These higher classes are naturally the ones to suffer most.

The great economic endeavour of the 19th century was to produce more wealth than was consumed, i.e., to economise. Economy was exalted to the height of a national social virtue, and economic produce was the basis of the raising of

individuals and of whole classes. All of us, or at least most of us, have started life one step higher than that from which our father set out. The parents' ambition of our parents was not like that of our grand-parents, to make us carry on the honest work of their life, but to enable us to do better and to live better. At last, when they had reached the top of the social ladder, "intellectuals" used the economies of their fathers for the benefit of the community, at whose disposal they placed the resources and the knowledge gained by former generations.

This process had, of course, to end somewhere. The new generations push their elders out of the way. They also, intellectually armed, wish to rise. They are like mountain climbers who had received ropes and ice-axes and who yet were not permitted to climb the mountain slope. Those who have a situation and who want to live act stoutly on the defensive. The others complain and suffer from a mediocrity which they had never before realized; they perform unwillingly the work which their parents were satisfied to do. Hence discontent and uneasiness.

Still another cause contributed to the instability and the insecurity of society. It is a well-known fact that for more than a century economic phenomena have been entirely surrendered to private initiative and are dominated by the most complete individualism and the most complete egoism. Private initiative has undoubtedly rendered society immense services, and without it it would not have been possible to obtain the same material results. But it is also a fact that, like every human institution, liberty has its inconvenience and its dangers.

An employer who starts an industry is not responsible to anybody for this action, and yet his initiative implies very wide social consequences. If it is prosperous, his new business will compete with other already existing firms and (it may be) force them to close their doors. The new industry may be the cause of unemployment and may ruin a whole district. If the employer who has started a new business is incapable of good management, or if the conditions under which he is working happen to be unfavourable, he will go bankrupt, and his employees, the people he has induced to leave their work on the land, will thus be ruined. The result of this will be unhappiness for individual families and new burdens for the community. Few people understand the real social significance of the employer, whose rôle they so light-heartedly assume.

The Great War has also intensified these adverse conditions. It does not lie within the scope of the present lecture to dwell on the economic consequences of this universal conflagration. The war has been the cause of overwhelming material loss; it destroyed existing commercial relations, it created new frontiers, it caused various raw materials to become scarce, it disorganised transport, it completely upset the international rates of exchange, it over-excited national feeling, and it gave rise to immoderate protection.

If a few individuals or a few nations owned the whole wealth of the world, and the others had nothing, the world could not subsist. Work is dependant on buying and selling. In the post-war epoch, those who wanted to sell were unable to buy, and those who were in a position to buy were unable to sell. This made it impossible to supply needs of individuals in the same way as in times past. The wealth saved by society, capital and goods alike, was soon used up. The existing capital was destroyed through inflation as well as through the fall in the value of money. Finally, throughout the duration of the war, all frontiers were closed to immigration, and immediately after the war, European immigrants were refused access to the New World. Europe was thus left with a considerable excess of labour, and unemployment became prevalent.

The unavoidable consequence of all these exiles was the lowering of the standard of individual life: the higher up a member of the community was on the social scale, the deeper was his fall.

On the other hand, the war did not reduce social and economic requirements. On the contrary, an apparent prosperity gave rise to expensive tastes and the illusion of a hitherto unknown luxury, especially in the case of women and young men who had not served in the war. This lack of balance between aspirations and the means to satisfy them was felt the more keenly because its growth had been so sudden.

Can purely material measures cope with this situation? No! The Socialistic policy, which aims at a more equitable distribution of property, tends not only to satisfy existing needs better, but also to give birth to new requirements. So that, in seeking the solution of the crisis, it merely extends its effects.

The satisfaction of the needs of the community as a whole is, alas, inseparably bound up with the destitution of individuals.

Society requires the existence of all kinds of trades, even the lowest and most repulsive. In an ideal society, a society which would see to the supply of the needs of every one of its members, who would agree, without the sting of want, to perform the lower duties? And yet, how could society subsist were these duties not fulfilled?

(Dr. William Martin, Directeur de la Politique Etrangère du "Journal de Genève," obligingly placed at our disposal the manuscript of this very interesting lecture which he delivered on January 1st at Manchester under the auspices of the Student Christian Movement.)

This is, in fact, a vicious circle, which is really tragic.

Any social policy, worthy of the name, must strive to reduce the discrepancy between the needs of individuals and the means to satisfy these needs. It should not try to satisfy all the demands of the members of society, for that would be utopian.

This conclusion brings us into the moral sphere. There is no opposition between religion and social progress; far from it. It is a strange aberration and a profound misconception of the Christian verities, which lead some people to consider religion and social progress as an antinomy. The very contrary is true. To cultivate one's soul, one must enjoy at least a minimum of comfort. Civilization raises us morally, although there are to be found in many large cities social conditions which foster immorality and hinder the development of all ideals.

It has often been the mistake of the Church not to understand this truth. Conversely, Socialism does not always realise that mere material satisfactions are not enough to secure happiness. Whatever they may be, they invariably leave room for disappointment, for new wishes. The richest and most powerful individuals are not happy. If it were possible to conceive a society in which everyone were wealthy and powerful, that society would not be a happy one, for it would not know resignation and justice.

The truth lies, no doubt, in a combination of both these formulas. Churches must take more heed of social needs; Socialism must devote more attention to moral realities. Besides, material prosperity can no more support the existence of civilization, than it can secure happiness for the individuals. A purely material civilization would, indeed, be a very poor thing. First of all, it would never survive. A civilization must live; and he who says "live" says "develop," and he who says "develop" says "progress." A civilization which can no longer progress is dead. Science has to maintain the *status quo* as well as to try to improve it. A striking and often cited example is that of petroleum. The world's petroleum reserves are far from being illimitable. If the present daily consumption of petroleum were to continue, if, e.g., the ratio of the United States were to extend to the rest of the world, our petroleum reserves would disappear within a comparatively short and quite calculable time. If, then, science had not succeeded in finding means of supplying the deficiency, or if it had not discovered another substance which would render the same services, a serious decline in our civilization would ensue.

But, purely scientific progress alone is not sufficient; civilization does not rest solely on technical perfection, but also on moral forces. I happened to be in Berlin, a few years ago, during a general strike of the municipal workmen. No water, no gas, no electricity, no trains were available. And I witnessed the poignant spectacle of a population of 3 millions of people forced to go to bed in the dark for want of light, forced to walk for hours for lack of means of conveyance, unable to drink and unable to wash. This tragic state of affairs went far to prove the instability of the comforts of which we are so proud. Without the sense of duty, without solidarity, life in common is not possible. Technical progress has but made individuals more dependent than ever upon one another. Berlin during the strike was in many respects worse off than a medieval town: for in the Middle Ages everyone was able to furnish his own lighting; distances were small and means of conveyance were unnecessary; each individual was able to provide for himself. Nowadays each individual depends on all the others. Our society, which seems to us so materialistic, is really solidarity in action. If we do not realize this, it is just because solidarity plays its part; but the moment the working of solidarity gets out of order, we feel the necessity of it.

Unfortunately, every prosperous civilization has a tendency to misunderstand its moral necessities. It finds its own destruction in its tendency to self-adoration. Little by little, the profound realities of life disappear behind the apparitions of mechanism.

A great pessimistic historian of contemporary Italy, Signor Guglielmo Ferrero, has compared our century with the 4th century of the Christian era, at the moment when the Roman Empire, having reached the acme of its glory and of its power, was on the eve of crumbling into barbarism. Philosophy had become materialistic, all faith had deserted the pagan temples. Comfort, prosperity and pleasure gave everyone the illusion of security, and this was the real reason of the collapse of paganism, of the overthrow of an empire which had been upborne for several centuries by a magnificent civilization.

Furthermore, the greatest French poet of the day, M. Paul Valéry, has said: "Nous autres civilisations, nous savons maintenant que nous sommes mortelles... Un frisson extraordinaire a couru dans la moelle de l'Europe. Elle a senti, par tous ses noyaux pensants qu'elle ne se reconnaissait plus, qu'elle cessait de se ressembler, qu'elle allait perdre conscience."

Why does not Europe recognize herself? Why does she not *resemble* herself any longer? And why does she know that she is mortal and that the fate of the Roman Empire at the dawn of the 4th century is perhaps awaiting her to-morrow?

It is because the civilization of Europe, which was entirely built up on a Christian foundation, has now turned purely materialistic. We condemn materialism, but only theoretically; practically we live in it, and if we do not take care, we shall die of it!

SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY.

The usual Monthly Meeting was held on the 21st inst., at 8.30 p.m., at the Union Helvetia.

About 25 members were present when the President, Mr. Cornu, opened the meeting. There were 16 admissions and 11 resignations, and these were duly dealt with as usual. Two of the resignations were due to the death of the respective members, and the President asked the meeting to rise in memory of the deceased.

The Chef de Cours afterwards called the attention of the members to the new session of the Education Department which had just started, inviting prospective pupils to communicate with him. It was further decided to assist the Swiss Institute by mentioning the excellent lectures in the circulars. It was thought that it would be much to the advantage of the members, especially those of the younger generation, if they would attend these lectures with a view to improving their knowledge of the English language.

It was stated that the Debating Society had made a successful start, and it is hoped that the attendance will steadily increase.

The next Cinderella Dance will be held on 7th February at the Midland Grand Hotel, St. Pancras, while the Annual General Meeting of the Society will take place on the 18th February at the Union Helvetia, and members were reminded by the President that, according to the Rules, there must be a minimum attendance of 40 members.

The decision with regard to a proposed contribution out of the proceeds of the Cinderella Dances towards the Fonds de Secours was left in abeyance, pending further consideration by the Committee.

It was decided, however, to re-introduce a book of addresses of holiday resorts in England, as well as seaside places, etc., which had been in existence before the war, and the Committee expects that members will enter the names and addresses of establishments which can be thoroughly recommended.

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Pour faciliter les arrangements, le Comité recommande aux participants de s'annoncer au plus tôt à M. P. F. Boehringer, 21, Garlick Hill, E.C. 4. (Telephone: City 4603).

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Swiss Mercantile Society

LONDON

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Requests for Pastor's visits, Baptisms, Weddings, etc., can be made on Sunday morning after the service, or to the Treasurer, C. Bertschinger, 114, Fore St., London, E.C.2.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS.

Tuesday, Feb. 3rd, at 6.45.—**CITY SWISS CLUB:** Monthly Meeting, preceded by a Supper, at Gatti's Restaurant, Strand, W.C.

Friday, Feb. 6, at 7.30.—**SWISS CHORAL SOCIETY:** Annual Dinner and Ball at 1, Gerrard Place, W.1.

Saturday, Feb. 7th, at 6.30.—**SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY:** Cinderella Dance at the Midland Hotel, St. Pancras, N.W.

Friday, Feb. 13th, at 8.30.—**SWISS INSTITUTE:** Lecture by J. Bulman Smith, Esq., M.A., on "The Significance of Little Things."
Wednesday, Feb. 18th, at 8.30.—**SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY:** Annual General Meeting at 1, Gerrard Place, W.1.

Saturday, Feb. 21st, at 6.30.—**CITY SWISS CLUB:** Cinderella Dance at Gatti's Restaurant, 436, Strand, W.C.

Friday, Feb. 27th, at 8.30.—**SWISS INSTITUTE:** Lecture by Mr. Emile Cammaerts on "Life in the Belgian Devastated Areas."

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