

THE GENERAL PLAN OF OUR STUDIES

(Concluded)

T. A. Jackson, lecturer and organiser for the North-Eastern District, Labour College, here concludes his brief discussion of "What we study, and Why."

WHAT a man *will* depends primarily upon what he *must*. Nature creates the *necessity*—geography and brain power in reciprocal interaction provide the *possibility*. Man's first motive cannot be other than to keep alive—his second, to have the best kind of life possible to him.

So far as his possibilities extend at a given point in time and space, he manipulates the forces of nature to the satisfaction of his needs. The more easily he satisfies his physical appetites the more time and energy he has available for the satisfaction of his mental needs—if any. The more, under pressure of necessity, his brain is used, the greater grows its power and need for use. If his fundamental emotion is to have life and have it more abundantly, his detail volitions will depend upon his opinion of what circumstances and acts are best calculated to give him his ideal of an abundant life. This, in turn, will vary as his experience has varied, and this again is an expression in summary of his relations with nature. Man's experience, and the resultant ideas and ideals, provide motives for his acts.

On the basis of a wide variation of geographical possibilities, human society specialised into innumerable social forms, each with its locally-adjusted consciousness. Geographical differences beget the specialisations of thought, language, and institutions. How can a World-society arise? How can man join together those whom the earth has thrust asunder?

The Tool—the Mother of Strife and the Father of Unity.

History is much more than a record of man's endeavour to attain a good time. Were it merely this we should find steady advancement in (so to say) a straight line. We should expect to find in all stages of social growth one idea of that-which-is-good expressed in varying degrees of clearness. Once a thing had been discovered to be good the knowledge of that fact would be preserved and universally acted upon. But has it been so?

Man lives in groups. That at any rate is an enduring fact. With it history begins. Grouping is a means of survival so essential that it is taken for granted in all disputes. Nay, more!—the chief disputes which have disturbed societies in the past, as in the present, have all arisen upon questions of how the *group* should act.

Upon what does the existence of the group depend? And why should these disputes arise continually? To maintain the existence of the individual units there must be a continuous supply of food (and its concomitants, clothing and shelter) and of the means to its maintenance, while to keep the group in being there must be some effective bond of association.

The quantity and quality of the food, clothing, and shelter depend upon the relation between the group-knowledge and the potentialities of the group-territory. The bond of association is provided by natural compulsion—negatively in the fear of enemies, animal and human; positively in the common need for food, companionship, and sex-expression. The existence of a group depends upon its command of the forces of nature—upon its knowledge of how to adapt natural materials to the satisfaction of human needs. What particular group arrangements these adaptations require, will, of course, vary with the concrete natural peculiarities; but just as the *fact* of human grouping gives the starting point for all history, so its general condition is the production from nature-given materials, by intelligent labour, of the requisites of human satisfaction.

Production implies *tools*, and skill in the use of them. The history of production is the history of the tool. But tools require users; hence the history of tools is the history of craftsmanship, which in turn implies specialisation. Thus this history of tools gives as its first outcome the social sub-division of productive labour. This social division of labour in turn implies complex diversity of experience and consequent variation of knowledge. It also implies the ever-increasing inter-dependence of the specialised parts, all being functionally necessary to the whole. Specialised tool-users lose freedom of movement in relation to the group, in the same measure that the group as a whole gains freedom in relation to nature. Capitalist society possesses the power of circumnavigating the globe in a few days; but only a tiny minority of those whose labour-activity makes this possible ever go more than a day's journey from their homes. Thus, the more the compulsion of combination the more there arises, in diverse knowledge and opinion, the possibility of dispute. The tool unites—yet foments antagonism!

The prime incentive to all improvement in tools and processes is the need to secure increasing control over nature. The productive activity of man is thus first directed to the creation of a surplus of necessities beyond his immediate needs. And, wherever a surplus actually results, the tools which have made it possible have created, in addition to the abstract possibility of dispute, a concrete object for it. Fortunate tribes are raided by unfortunates—to the tools of production are added the tools of war; to organisation for internal social maintenance is added organisation for external defence, and, then, conquest. External war creates the possibility of internal. Property arises as a means of conserving the surplus in the hands of a class of proprietors. The State is invented to safeguard those proprietors and their possessions. Class conflicts arise for control of the State. Religions, originally expressions of group emotions, become revised and reinterpreted in terms of class-experience, class-ideals, and class-interests. The general ideals of good, conditioned by man's needs, are thus integrated into national, and differentiated again into class ideals; and the fights for the ideal become national wars and revolutionary class-struggles.

What then is History?

History is the record of the progressive inter-action of man and nature; of the method whereby mankind has acquired predominance in the struggle; of the mental processes involved in that acquirement; of the surplus of wealth resulting; of the changes of form assumed by that surplus in keeping with the transformations of social-relations consequent upon changes in the nature of the tools and the forms of their reaction upon social structure; of the varying mode in which man has organised his forces; and the conflicts which have arisen for the control and direction of the production process and the enjoyment of the results. It is a record of the growth of the social organism from ignorant necessity-driven agreement, through group and class-antagonisms, into universal intelligent association for the common well-being.

This is the Materialist Conception of History, and this gives the ground plan of our studies:—

- (a) *Evolution*:—The growth of man and nature.
- (b) *Economic Geography*:—The particular relation between man and nature, and the general transformations of man's activity thence resulting.
- (c) *The Science of Understanding*:—The study of man's chief tool—the organ of understanding and the general method of its use.
- (d) *History*:—The record of man's general struggles with nature and the particular social transformations resulting.
- (e) *Economics*:—The particular study of the inner mechanism of capitalist society, its specific dependence upon history, and its general revolutionary potentialities.

We may be told that this programme is sordid, material, and unspiritual; or on the other hand that it is utopian, romantic, and abstract. It is all these, and more also!

Invited to choose between the idealist, who explains man's being by his thinking, and the formal materialist, who explains man's thinking by his being, we solve the contradiction by interpreting man's history as the progressive result of a struggle between man's thinking and being—between his ideas and

his experience, his ideals and his needs, his desires and his powers—between the nature behind and the nature before.

Historical materialism does not deny the existence or the power of ideas or ideals—it remembers only that they arise in the life-activity of concrete, living men. The question which came first, the thought or the deed, is idle; for the direction of brain-activity is given by the needs of the material organism, and the activity itself is a “deed” of nature. The thought is a deed and the deed implies thought. History records the development of man’s understanding, not as the master but as the servant of his body.

The Materialist Conception of History emphasises the fact that the quantity and quality of man’s economic activity determines relatively and absolutely the quantity and quality of the rest of his intellectual activities.

After all, why should we flatter the brain any more than the liver? A thought is a reality—a relation between material things—an activity of a material brain induced by its relation to material things. Knowledge is consciousness of relation, and sound thinking about History gives us as a result consciousness of the progressive relation between thoughts and things.

THOS. A. JACKSON