PRODUCTION AND POLITICS

VII.—The Sheep in Statecraft

Newbold here continues his interpretation of English History from the Marxian point of view. Compare the facts as presented by him with the sort of "history" we were taught in State elementary schools, and you will understand why we urge the necessity of Independent Working-Class Education. (Back numbers of the PLEBS *containing six previous articles in the series can be obtained from Plebs Office, price 2s. 6d. post paid.)*

HITHERTO in this series of articles we have had to do with the reactions in social and political organisation of the evolving economics of grazing and ploughing, of cow and ox, of milk and grain. We have been concerned with the successive changes in land cultivation having as its primary element the use of cattle. Now, when we have come to the struggle for constitutional restraints upon the king, and the setting up of the High Court of Parliament, we are witnessing the efforts of the lords of a society based on cattle-rearing to standardise the customs of a passing epoch and to hold in check the political forces released by a new economic factor; the factor of a commodity easy to circulate and easy to exchange for money, a commodity to be associated henceforth with the history of England—*wool.*

We are witnessing the disintegration of Feudalism. The word *feudal* derives from *feodum.* "The word *feodum,*" says Professor Maitland, "does not, I believe, occur before the end of the 9th century. It is derived from the German word for cattle." The *beneficium* or *feodum* was "a gift of land made by the king out of his estate, the grantee coming under a special obligation to be faithful . . . in consideration of the gift." The gift, at first, had been made for life. Then it became hereditary. The notion resulting was that of a *dominium* divided between lord and tenant, a notion at variance with Roman Law, but surviving in English Law to this very day. More important to us than this resulting notion is the derivation of the terms *to fee* and *feudal.* They have to do with the gift, the lease of land for *cattle,* and they give us the key to manorial society and feudal polity. The mediæval world was based on *cattle.*

In this mediæval world there was next to no interchange of commodities and, consequently, practically no system of levying taxes as distinct from rent. There was only one real tax levied in England under feudalism, and that was Danegeld. Scutage was only a commutation in money form of a military service and, therefore, not a tax in the strict sense of the word. Danegeld when revived by William I. was known as *hidage,* i.e., a tax on plough-land. It fell into final disuse in 1224. In 1322 scutage also disappeared.

The king might, also, from time to time, exact from the tenants on his private lands, his demesne, a *tallage.* This was due as an *auxilium civitatis* or "town's aid" from boroughs, and as *dona* or "gifts" from tenants on his other manors. It was customarily one-tenth of the tenant's personal property or some less amount. It was levied at the lord's discretion and, strictly speaking, denoted villein status.

Originally, tallages were rarely enforced, for the simple reason that when personal property was small they yielded little. With the development of sheep-rearing, however, and the growing accumulation of money

or other movables representing equivalent values obtained as the result of the sale of wool, personal property increased very considerably and became much more worth taxing than the scanty produce of the arable land. In 1168 and 1173 the king began to appreciate the fact that there were new sources of revenue to be tapped. So, also, the Pope; and first with the Saladin Tithe in 1188, and frequently for a century afterwards Rome imposed a tax on movables. The king followed suit, sometimes under papal sanction and sometimes under strained interpretations of the theory of feudal tenure, seeking to stretch the tallage to include all tenants as being his tenants whether on his own lands or those over which he was over-lord.

Strictly speaking, a *tallage* could only be levied on his own manorial tenants, but the levy of a *tenth* and a *fifteenth* imposed respectively on tenants in boroughs and tenants out of boroughs, regardless of whether they were or were not tenants in royal demesne, was a development of the sovereign lord's claim to tallage *all* his tenants immediate and intermediate, to establish rights as over-lord equivalent to those which he exerted customarily as lord. This development of the theory of lordship, *fostered by the royal judges*, sprang directly out of the realisation by the king and his ministers that there was now an accumulation of wool to be appropriated. First, there was the material basis, the wool, there available. Then there developed the idea of the legality of a new system of contributions to meet royal requirements.

In his *The Early English Customs* (Harvard Economic Studies) Mr. Gras says :—

> The national system which has persisted throughout the centuries was, like equity, built upon the woolsack . . . the chief custom . . . in England from 1275 onwards . . . was on wool, with the two very secondary commodities, woolfells and hides added (p. 95).
>
> The outstanding feature, however, is that England's chief exports were wool and cloth, not wool at an earlier period and cloth at a later, but both together, at least from 1303 when the accounts dealing with cloth begin (p. 108).

The customs were permanent in character and, generally, imposed under royal prerogative. The subsidies were, to begin with, temporary grants made by parliament. From 1350, however, customs and subsidies were steadily consolidated.

The wool subsidy, like Danegeld and the income-tax of to-day, was in its inception a measure of war finance. It was necessary to equip the armies and pay for the campaigns required to recover the French domains lost by the kings who had come after Henry II. Without the wool-trade, the resulting money economy and the intercourse with Italian and Low Country merchants, it would have been impossible for Edward I. or Edward III. to carry on their wars against France and Scotland. The trade policy of these kings, especially the latter, is now conceded by all the authorities to have been prompted by no higher motives than those of financial expediency. Both Edwards taxed manufactures lest wool should in any way be exported without paying tribute to their hungry exchequer. Both of them favoured Italians and other alien merchants, because these could provide them with cheaper and more ample money and war-stores. Both of them were utterly unscrupulous in their dealings with their creditors and their subjects.

The very strategy of Edward III. was determined by the exigencies of the trade in wool, without which his armies could never have marched.

His aim was to recover territories in the South-West of France, but to secure the sinews of war he needed to commit himself to an embarrassing alliance with the merchant cities of Flanders and to fight in Picardy rather than in Gascony and Guienne. Nor would these cities, feudatories of the Count of Flanders, feudatory of the King of France, commit themselves to him and his alliance until, by advancing his utterly untenable claim to the throne of France, he had made it impossible to compromise, impossible to retract, impossible to leave them in the lurch. Only then would the Flemings advance him money, and even then, on one occasion, they prevented him leaving the country until he had paid the interest, and on others kept as hostages, for the due meeting of his liabilities, members of his family and high ministers of state.

Edward III.'s much-vaunted settlement of Low Country weavers in this country was mere provision for the more unfortunate among his allies, a move in a diplomatic game. His establishment of the Company or the Merchants of the Staple was a concession wrung from him by natives when no one else could or would provide him with money. Professor Unwin, who has made a special study of this aspect of Edwardian policy, has scant patience with the view that the Staple was established to foster English trade apart from the money it would bring in to the Exchequer. Only when Henry IV. came to the throne and parliament became a power (as the needed ally of an insecure monarch) did policy reflect a desire to foster the growth of trade in English hands by grant of the Charter to the Company of the Merchant Adventurers.

But in the 15th and early 16th centuries the political influence of the Merchants of the Staple and the Merchant Adventurers was very small and very irregular They could rarely bargain with kings as could the merchants of Italy and the Hause. The great issues of internal history were being fought out between the Crown, employing material resources bought with the revenues of the wool and cloth trade, and the lords of the plough-lands who, from the days of Magna Carta and the Barons' War, through those of the Lords Ordainers, the deposition of Edward II. and Richard II., to the Wars of the Roses and the final ruin of Bosworth Field, were vainly endeavouring to stabilise the feudal polity sapped and undermined by the swirling currents of early commodity production, of the wool-trade and of money economy.

J. T. WALTON NEWBOLD

(To be continued.)