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AN INTRODUCTION
TO
ENGLISH POLITICS

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AN INTRODUCTION
TO
ENGLISH POLITICS

BY
JOHN M. ROBERTSON

LONDON
GRANT RICHARDS

1900

"The sociologist has three main quests—First, he must try to discover the conditions that determine mere aggregation and concourse. Secondly, he must try to discover the law that governs social choices, the law, that is, of the subjective process. Thirdly, he must try to discover also the law that governs the natural selection and the survival of choices, the law, that is, of the objective process."—*Professor Giddings.*

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PREAMBLE

THE following treatise originated remotely in a lecture delivered as preliminary to a course on "Modern English Politicians" (from Bolingbroke to Gladstone), the aim of the prefatory address being to trace in older politics, home and foreign, general views which should partly serve as guides to modern cases, or at least as preparation for their scientific study; while the main course dealt with modern political problems as they have arisen in the careers and been handled by the measures of modern English statesmen. The opening exposition, developed into an essay, and published as a series of magazine articles, is now again expanded into a treatise, by way of covering the ground more usefully.

It makes no pretention, nevertheless, to a complete or systematic treatment of political history, or of political forms and theories. The object in view from the first has been, not the technical anatomy or documentary history of institutions, but the bringing into light of the ruling forces in all political life, ancient and modern alike. It seeks to help the reader to fulfil the precept of Montaigne: "*Qu'il ne luy apprenne pas tant les*

histoires qu' à en juger." Of learned political histories there are many, and of expert treatises on political theory there is no lack. While, however, I have profited by many such, I had long felt in my own studies the need of a survey which should bring some of the apparent lessons of past political history to bear on the problems of the present in a way that the works known to me have not ostensibly attempted, or at least have not followed out as one could wish. Dr. Freeman laid down the principle very fully, indeed exorbitantly, when he insisted that we ought "freely to employ every part of history to illustrate every other part¹;" but the mere political history to which he limited himself is but one side of the process of evolution, which is what it really behoves us to understand. It would be unfair and ungrateful to make light of the very real help given to all students of our own history, for instance, by such works as Green's, and the recent compilation entitled *Social England*. With all its faults of hasty generalisation and self-contradiction, Green's work remains one of the most intelligent and most stimulating performances of our time, and is to be credited with inspiring much that has been done since. It is in the express treatment of problems of social evolution that there is need for new developments. Several members of the Marxian school have dealt very acutely and instructively with the element of economic causation in ancient and modern life; from a different political standpoint, the late Professor Thorold Rogers, in his lectures on *The Economic Interpretation of History* and the *Industrial and Commercial History of England*, has enlarged in a

¹ *History of Federal Government*, 2nd. ed. p. 274.

suggestive fashion on the same theme ; Professor Ashley has treated the medieval period with much more thoroughness in his *Introduction to English Economic History and Theory*, wherein he brings to English knowledge much important German and other research ; and Professor Cunningham in his *Growth of English Industry and Commerce* has supplied a most learned and illuminating study, which gives even more than it promises. On the other hand, a number of writers have studied periods of history and special societies with an eye to their interpretation in terms of human character as known to us in our experience.

Apart, however, from differences of opinion as to some of the data and dicta of many of these writers, I have found myself at times in need of a different method, of other analyses, of another aim, and of further colligations of phenomena, than they supply ; and the following chapters are among the results of my inquiry. Since the book was planned, and even since it was first prepared for publication, there have appeared several English works, such as the *Western Civilisation* of Professor Cunningham (1898), and Professor A. J. Grant's *Greece in the Age of Pericles* (1897), which struck me as valuable and instructive performances of a kind I had craved. Had I met them earlier my own attempts would doubtless have been better guided. As it is, their method gives me more confidence in the rightness of my aim, whatever the failures of the execution.

It is very obvious that the present undertaking runs many risks. Touching on several fields of study which have been explored by accomplished scholars and by

experienced specialists, it cannot have escaped errors of historical detail such as the specialists impute to each other ; and after finding fault with a good many of the inferences of experts from their special data I must needs incur similar objection in rather large measure. As regards such criticism my only anticipatory plea must be that, while I have not spared pains to compare authorities and check the primary sources at many doubtful points, my essay, as aforesaid, does not at all profess to be a manual of historical fact for the use of specialists. Rather it is a process of reasoning that seeks to bring home to the reader the nature of the historical developments dealt with, in terms of human life, of average happiness, of culture, of moral and social science, with a view to qualifying him in some degree for the great but little-regarded task of framing his own political and sociological opinions. To this end it has broken up the total problem into a variety of special inquiries, taken up in different countries and different ages, striving always, however, to indicate the organic connection of all social processes, mental, moral, and material, and to reach through analysis a synthesis.¹ If such an attempt should but serve to mediate in some degree between the schools which treat more or less exclusively the different processes here glanced at, it will perhaps sufficiently justify its existence.

At the risk even of failing in such mediation in

¹ When this was first written I had not read the definition of sociology by Professor Giddings, to which I desire to declare my general adhesion : " Specifically, sociology is an interpretation of social phenomena in terms of physical activity, organic adjustment, natural selection, and the conservation of energy. . . . It is strictly an explanatory science, fortifying induction by deduction, and referring effects to veritable causes " (*Principles of Sociology*, 3rd ed. p. 419).

some cases, I am fain to suggest that (save for such recent treatises as I have alluded to, which give encouraging proof of a counter-tendency, and for some which seem to me illaudable in their ideals and tendency), the line of specialism in political science of late years has been rather away from than towards a practical use of the research accumulated. Scholarly study grows more exact, more extensive, more burdensome to the student ; but there is hardly a proportional advance in the thinking brought to bear on the facts established. One is at times almost driven to think that there has been a relative retrogression. In the first quarter of the century, Hallam prefaced his study of political history with a severe comment on the Scotch sociologists, in particular Millar, who had taken up his subject on the impulse of Montesquieu and Voltaire. Hallam made a much more minute research than Millar had done ; and yet, though his generally robust judgment yields us manifold instruction, he at times falls into platitudes of comment and ineptitudes of reflection of which Millar could not have been guilty. Some energy of the speculative reason seems to have been lost, even for the Whig, in the reaction following on the French Revolution.

The documentary research of Hallam, in turn, is much less exhaustive than that of Bishop Stubbs ; and Bishop Stubbs in turn sets up a troubled wonder by some of his moral and sociological generalisations. Behind the admirable learning of the later scholar we find a vacillation of judgment which seems to be almost in the ratio of his research, and which can hardly be set down to scientific caution, seeing that on the deepest issues of

historical philosophy he habitually generalises with all the confidence of the pulpit. And the phenomenon is common. The earlier writers investigate slightly, but reason vigorously; the later writers investigate many details, but reason feebly or timidly on general principles. Even in the abundant and valuable sociological historiography of France we seem to see the same tendency. Guizot, like Hallam, was a more exact student than his predecessors; and, living in a less reactionary atmosphere, he was much more energetic than Hallam in the theoretic way. In our own day his history of French civilisation is ostensibly superseded by that of M. Rambaud; but it can hardly be said that M. Rambaud, with all his knowledge and good sense, is on the whole more luminous than his more erratic precursor. So, in Germany, Mommsen, erudition apart, is certainly not a sounder or deeper historical thinker than Heeren, or even than Niebuhr, both of whom, if they fell into errors of apriorism, were incapable of the indulgence in race prejudice which Mommsen so frequently permits himself, to say nothing of the chaos of pragmatism into which he falls when he would philosophise on such phenomena as those of Roman religion. And while some of the later German specialists have done much sound and sober work, the historians proper, perhaps recoiling from the verbalism of Hegel and his school, so entirely shun theory—unless it be of the blatant patriotic sort—that they hardly influence political philosophy at all.

Historiography is in itself a sociological phenomenon, and the patriotic or racial bias just mentioned is to be noted as a product of the special political conditions of our age. One of the chief of them is the deliberate

development, under the auspices of Bismarck, of a gospel of national egoism in terms of quasi-philosophy. Hegel gave the lead when he constructed a political philosophy in the interests of the reconstructed Prussian system ; and since 1860 German historians have supplied the demand for patriotic and racial doctrine in a fashion not to be matched for *naïveté*, not to say puerility, since the Middle Ages. In Mommsen, though he has only incidental opportunities for airing it, the tendency becomes unpardonable. If we looked to the work of the first quarter of the century, when Germany was still cosmopolitan throughout, we should be inclined to say that nothing is more un-German than this prejudice ; but it is really a degeneration not merely from the older German breadth of view, but from the temper of the whole historical science of Europe in the latter part of last century. The change is seen in French writers of the Restoration, and in some French and English writers of yesterday ; the vitiating gospel of race, turned even to Teutonic account, is seen in the two Thierrys ; again, with a difference, in Michelet ; yet again in Taine ; and among ourselves in Carlyle, in Froude, with special excess in Freeman, and in some degree even in Green. It all represents a descent below the imperfect science of Montesquieu and Voltaire.

Few students, I believe, have yet realised how comprehensive was the suspension of scientific thought on social law after the French Revolution—how abundant was sociological discussion before, how restricted and short-sighted under the reaction, at least in England. I have been at some pains to show at how many points I have found my own generalisations had been anti-

pated by the Scotch and French sociologists of last century. Such acknowledgments are seldom necessary as regards the historians of the latter half of the present century. They yield, as the old phrase goes, immense information but little knowledge, either treating the demand for generalising ideas as a dangerous taste or supplying ideas which stand for no effort of thought at all comparable to their pains in amassing facts. Had Freeman's General Sketch of European History been made as long as that of Koch (1790 and later) it would still have been, as it actually is, inferior to that in instructiveness, actuality, and real comprehension, however much it might make parade of the "comparative method" and of exact scholarship.

It is true that even during the period of maximum reaction against the French Revolution there was arising in England a school of economists who, taking their departure from the work of Adam Smith, really did contribute to the foundation of a social science. At a time when these thinkers are being obstinately disparaged because they did not go further, because they sought or were content only to elaborate a mercantilist economics without reconstructing social ethics or aiming at a complete humanistic economics, it becomes necessary in the very interests of a comprehensive social science to point out that they were substantially among its promoters, and not among its frustrators. A methodically restricted analysis is perfectly legitimate so far as it goes, and may prove the best means towards one more comprehensive. The criticism to which the "orthodox" economists were and are justly open is that their analysis was at some vital points unscientific

and erroneous ; and that in particular they constantly evaded or obscured the vitally important mercantilist problem of the process of money-saving. With this error they were charged in their own day, but without any effect on their doctrine or its acceptance ; hence, no doubt, a real retardation of social science. But on other sides they were not frustrative or fallacious ; and in connection with their school there were produced many isolated works of unsystematic social science, which compare very favourably with the whole output of to-day.

Such works as those of the elder Samuel Laing (the *Notes of a Traveller*, the *Journal of a Residence in Norway*, and *A Tour in Sweden*), and Joseph Kay's *Social Condition and Education of the People in England and Europe* (1850), are not easily to be matched in their kind in our own time for constant breadth and sagacity of reflection on social phenomena ; and even where they maintain what would in their own day and now be called Philistine positions they tend to do it with an amount of critical energy not always exhibited by their more æsthetically-minded antagonists. Laing, indeed, illustrates very strikingly the relative tendencies of the older speculative and the later narrative method. When he reasons *a priori* as to the conditions and aspects of early English rural life he naturally goes astray : we have only to consult such specialists as Mr. Seebohm and Professor Ashley to ascertain as much ; but despite the blanks in his real knowledge he is a more philosophic and instructive observer of social life wherever he goes than almost any later traveller who can be mentioned. Less brilliant and less literary than M. Taine, he is a

safer guide. And alongside of such observers, English politics fifty years ago had in Richard Cobden a kind of popular publicist who, for his combination of comprehensive principles with really relevant knowledge, is not surpassed by his more literate successors on his own side. These men had a clear and arguable philosophy of conduct, national and individual; and we may say broadly of the Manchester school so-called that it was much more rationally conscientious, and therefore more truly humanistic, than the school now in the political ascendant, which really develops and exaggerates all the defects of the Manchester school under names which nominally repudiate its ideals.

The accumulated knowledge of the last generation, in short, has not been even partially assimilated in the sphere of practice; and there has been no steady development, in that sphere, of either the general sociology of last century or the best economic sociology of the "Manchester" period. Professor Vinogradoff of St. Petersburg, in the able introduction to his valuable study of *Villainage in England*, dwells on the growing superiority of the later historians of social conditions as regards exactness of knowledge and caution in generalisation. I am fain to urge that the process of generalisation is passing altogether out of use, leaving us mere masses of facts that do not instruct us. The Professor's own work compares significantly, on this head, with those of such of his predecessors as Palgrave and Kemble. Mr. Seebohm, again, prefaced his excellent treatise on *The English Village Community* with a plea for the study of the past to the end of regulating the present or guiding the future. But are the students or

the citizens in any way acting upon that counsel? My fear is that they are not. The latest historian of medieval London, expert in all matters of ancient documents, incidentally comments on the modern Irish problem in the language of ordinary English prejudice,¹ even as did Mr. Pearson a generation ago. Such students have gained no political wisdom from their research. Our students, roughly speaking, are apparently ceasing to be practical, and our practical men are apparently ceasing to be students.

Now, such lop-sided development cannot but be harmful in practice. The practical problem grows more pressing, more susceptible of hasty and incompetent handling by those who proceed on their first impulses; and all the while the student of past development gets further aloof from the issue which he ought to illuminate. By the very fact of his attitude and spirit of specialism he is in no expert attitude to the living problem, which he too often faces in what Professor Mahaffy calls the "elderly" temper.

The last-named writer has the high merit of handling things ancient in a living and vivacious way, feeling instinctively, one can see, the psychological continuity of politics, and carrying deeper, at times, than did his predecessors, that process of penetration by which Grote and other English historians, accustomed to democratic politics, admittedly comprehended Greek history more fully than did the Germans who lacked such experience. But Professor Mahaffy at the same time exemplifies the snares of such an undertaking. To one of another way of thinking, he seems a partisan

¹ J. H. Round, *The Commune of London*, 1899, pp. 138-40.

first and a sociologist afterwards ; and he is himself at times an example of the "elderly" spirit, refusing to submit his own predilections to scientific treatment, and imposing them wilfully on his subject matter. In the end, after leading us at times to hope for a truly sociological survey of Greek history from his pen, he has produced one on "the Chatauquan idea," which is definitively inadequate.

The final sociological criticism of such treatises as those of Professor Mahaffy is that they are explicitly anti-progressive. Always insisting on the unfitness of masses for self-rule, they do nothing to make them more fit ; preferring to wall in the ideal of progress and to consecrate social inequality. With such mere fulminations of class bias, social science can have little to do. If sociology stands for anything, it stands for the approving recognition of developments, of betterments, as well as of declines, in human affairs. If self-development is a good for any man, it is a good for all ; and apart from any question of bias, social science of its very nature must contemplate the further extension of what has extended in the past, the continuance of social law, the further play of forces recognised as persistent. It must equally recognise, of course, the play of counter forces, the frustration of one tendency by another ; but no experience thus far can entitle any man to predict a perpetual see-saw or balance of tendencies. If a scientific man should ever come to such a conclusion, he will put it as an avowal of reluctant pessimism, not as a complacent propaganda. But Professor Mahaffy does not scruple to ground his gospel of political

inequality and exclusiveness on his theosophy and his Christianity.¹

On the other part, we have a valuable and growing sociological literature in which, despite striking exceptions, the prevailing tendency is still to discuss theory *in vacuo* or in abstraction as regards at least the higher civilisations. Far be it from me even to seem to make this a ground of detraction as regards such admirable works as the *Dynamic Sociology* of Professor Lester Ward and the *Principles of Sociology* of Professor Giddings, to both of which I owe no less encouragement than enlightenment. I do but urge that they should be followed by works of historico-critical verification, were it only to establish their sound lessons against error. In the words of Professor Giddings: "History without deductive illumination is chaos. Deduction without verification is undoubtedly the very 'light that never was on sea or land.'" The forceful example of Mr. Spencer, in seeking the principles of sociology among the lower societies—as if in the conviction that we thus get as it were the anatomy or permanent laws of all society—is still potent, despite great advances on his method; so that neither is our history truly sociological nor our sociology avowedly historical. Our sympathetic quasi-sociological historians, like Mr. Green, leave us asking for a more judicial method; our more judicial historians, like Mr. Gardiner, who has produced a very stimulating *Introduction to the Study of English History* (1881) besides offering an abundance of general verdicts in his valuable *History of the Jacobean and Caroline periods*, leave us seeking for a more scientific

¹ *Survey of Greek Civilisation*, 1897, preface.

analysis. Holding with Mr. Lester Ward that sociology runs a risk of becoming a dead science if divorced from constructive purpose, and holding with Buckle that history without scientific generalisation has little intellectual value, I have here aimed at turning history to sociological account, and at making sociology yield social guidance—that is, in the indirect way in which alone, as is well contended by MM. Langlois and Seignobos, history can give such lessons.¹ The sociologist will find, I hope, some illustrations in these pages for some of the most modern theories of his science, which I have not here discussed; and the special student of political science so-called will at least find a little concrete matter whereon to use his tools.

In the hands of some of its most accomplished cultivators, that science is found finally yielding a mere blank commission to the student who would fain be practical. A numerous and distinguished school continue to press upon us the quaint theory that the French Revolution came about because political theorists last century did not pay proper heed to Genesis as an historical document, and instead preached anew the formulas of the "State of Nature" and "The Social Contract." Sir Frederick Pollock, one of the chief ornaments of this school, begins and ends a survey of political philosophy, as did Mr. Tremenheere before him, with the advice "Back to Aristotle"—Aristotle, who could not see the unfitness of slavery as a foundation for the "good life" he inculcated, and whose formula of "the good life," by itself, is surely rather vaguer than any formula about the Rights of Man.

¹ *Introduction aux études historiques*, 1897, pp. 277-79, 288.

But where Aristotle is constructive, neither Mr. Tremeneere nor Sir Frederick has a word to say about acting on his teaching. For such conservative thinkers, Aristotle is a merely negative authority. Mr. Tremeneere considered himself to have disposed of nascent Socialism a generation ago by pointing out that it had been confuted two thousand years before ; as if everything else had not been as much confuted when free Greece went under. To-day, with Socialism waxing and refusing to hold itself confuted by the ancients, Sir Frederick Pollock does not even suggest how much of the Socialism of Aristotle would be "good life" for us. The one thing he is positive about is that we must not again meddle with "the Social Contract."

Well, we are now as completely done with the Social Contract as with the cosmology and ethnology and sociology of Genesis ; but the spirit which drove our predecessors to *a priori* formulas for grounds of social reconstruction is apparently as vigorous to-day as ever, albeit much less turbulent for the time being. The part of wise men, then, would seem to be, to think how best it can be helped rationally to its end, lest haply it should once more grasp thereat blindly and ruinously, to the cry of some newer formula than the Social Contract. That other of the Rights of Man has a great deal of adaptability, and is really not to be fought by the mere reiteration of Aristotle's "good life," which on the contrary would serve very well to the same end. Instead of tags of Aristotle, the situation seems to need concrete prescriptions in terms of a wider survey than Aristotle's, to be made, let us hope, with some gain from his method and sagacity.

As against the negative results reached by the school which handles only problems of abstract political ethics, it is significant that Dr. Cunningham, making his survey of Roman economic development without any bias in favour of Socialism—of which he notes rather the dangers than the possibilities—comes to the conclusion that “It is only under very special conditions, including the existence of a strong government to exercise a constant control, that free play for the formation of associations of capitalists bent on securing profit is anything but a public danger”; and he cautiously sums up that “The problem of leaving sufficient liberty for the formation of capital, and for enterprise in the use of it, without allowing it licence to exhaust the national resources, has not been solved.” He even pronounces that “it was the disgrace of the Roman people in the time of the Republic that they made no attempt to solve this problem.”¹ Without raising the issue as to “disgrace,” we may surely say that there is a singular futility in all our studies of history if we cannot learn from them something as to our own problems, or at least as to the need of seeking to solve them.

This, it will be remembered, was the professed doctrine of the late Sir John Seeley. “It is a favourite maxim of mine,” he wrote at the outset of his *Expansion of England*, “that history, while it should be scientific in its method, should pursue a practical object. That is, it should not merely gratify the reader’s curiosity about the past, but modify his view of the present and his forecast of the future.” Here, it may be said, is the very ideal that I have represented as

¹ *Western Civilisation*, p. 165.

missing recognition. It is with reluctance that I revert to this case ; but I am constrained to urge, though the criticism may be turned against my own prescription, that the *Expansion of England* is rather a miscarriage than an application of the principle in hand. With much brilliancy and suggestiveness in narrative, it yields neither an induction nor a deduction. Entirely excluding all study of the essential problem, that of the reactions of expansion on home life ; treating the whole political problem solely in terms of that very expansion of which we are to judge the expediency, it finally does but balance between ideals, alternately repudiating newspaper optimism and applying it. In so far as it turns for light to comparative history it makes no use of any sociological hint thereby obtainable ; since it flatly takes for granted (p. 304) that Oriental empire cannot react on English methods as the Roman empire did on Rome. Substantially, the book is a vivacious study *in vacuo*, constantly suggesting a possession of superior light but communicating none ; somewhat as, in the opinion of some of us, the accomplished author did in the discussions he raised on the problems of religion. Too intelligent and perceptive ever to fail of being suggestive and interesting, he somehow never reached solutions, or even conclusions. Even Freeman is at times more fruitful.

If it be replied that the failure of such a student in such an undertaking is a proof *a fortiori* that the undertaking is vain—that where Seeley miscarried, I need not think to fare better, and that I am discrediting my own advice,—I can but answer that the application given by English university thought at present to any critical

method is not in my opinion decisive of its possibilities: I am not presumptuous enough to doubt the presence of endless potentiality in the groups of highly trained specialists there assembled, but I venture to suspect the environment, the traditions, of standing in the way of vital criticism. When our English universities actually do seek to grapple with modern problems by the light of modern thought, it is surprising how far mere party prejudice can determine the procedure. Their "solid" work lies in the study of facts as to which students can be easily and effectively "examined"; when it comes to general principles, their methods seem to be far from "solid." I learn that in a certain Oxford college there was recently set as an essay-subject in preparation for "Greats" the question: "What support does Socialism receive from the doctrine of evolution?" and that the books recommended to the students for special study were Mr. Kidd's *Social Evolution* and Mr. Mallock's *Social Progress*—two treatises which, not to speak it profanely, are respectively pleas for customary irrationalism in religion and commercialist conservatism in politics, and both paralogsms at that. In no continental or American university probably could two such books be so founded on; and on such a basis no true social science can be reached. Such methods go some little way to explain the singular judgments on modern politics disclosed to us in some of the collected letters of the late Professor Jowett, so perspicacious a mind in the field of his special scholarship. For the time being, however, such books represent the output of English political thought as apart from the (latterly) dwindling literature of Socialism, Liberalism so-called being almost

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destitute of scientific propaganda ; and even when a learned and sober specialist like Dr. Cunningham puts a Liberal view of economic and culture-history, he is found to lend colour to the traditionalist view in respect of his occasional acceptance of the old formulas which explain national differences as innate, and national developments as the result of the qualities developed. Against alike the obscurantist and the verbalist forms of doctrine, the following pages are directed.

But let me not seem to claim for this scanty introduction anything like a fulfilment of what is here declared to be needful. It is but an effort to survey the ground in what I hold to be the right direction ; and I can but hope that by setting up as it seeks to do a series of provocations to the study and discussion of tendencies and principles, it will help to provide what safeguards are needed to its own errors. In this concern for fresh discussion is to be found the only excuse I can offer for what may seem a disproportionate attention to certain historical problems and certain ethical issues.

JOHN M. ROBERTSON.

NOTE

The series of biographical studies to which this treatise forms the introduction, is in preparation.

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