

## **Idealism and materialism in the conception of history**

**By Paul Lafarge (1895)**

*The following extract is taken from a lecture delivered by Paul Lafargue, under the auspices of the Group of Collectivist Students of Paris, this lecture being a reply to one given by Jean Jaurès on the above-named subject. The terms Idealism and Materialism are used here to designate the “two opposite views regarding the nature of human thought, that it is to say, concerning the ultimate sources of intellectual cognition, concerning the origin of ideas”, the former designating “the doctrine of innate ideas, of ideas a priori”, and the latter “the doctrine of cognition through experience, through the senses, the doctrine of ideas a posteriori” (Heine).*

Man and the animals think only because they have a brain; the brain transforms sensations into ideas as dynamos convert into electricity the movement supplied to them. It is nature, or rather, the *natural environment*—not to use an expression that would idealise Nature as a metaphysical entity, as did the philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century,—it is the natural environment that forms the brain and the other organs. I say intentionally the other organs because, just as the spiritualists separate man from the animal group in order to set him up as a miraculous being, for whom God comes to earth to be crucified, in the same way the idealists isolate the brain from the other organs in order to subject its function, that is to say thought, to magical causes.

The natural environment that created the organs and the brain of man has brought them to such a degree of perfection that they are capable of the most marvellous adaptations. Thus, for centuries Christians and civilised man carried off Negroes from the coast of Africa to sell them as slaves in the colonies. These blacks were barbarians and savages, separated from civilised man by thousands of years of culture, and yet, at the end of an extremely short time they learned the trades of civilisation.

In Paraguay the Jesuits had a social experience—the most remarkable known to me—which for us Socialists, is of first rate importance, because it shows with what extraordinary rapidity a nation is transformed after being transplanted in a new social environment. The Jesuits, those incomparable educators, those learned exploiters of labour, formed with savages a civilised people of more than 150,000 individuals.

The Guaranys whom they sequestered in the *pueblos* of Paraguay had wandered naked in the forests, their only arms the bow and wooden club. Their knowledge of agriculture being merely rudimentary, they cultivated only maize. So little developed was their intelligence that they could only count up to twenty, and still were obliged to count on their fingers. One finger was one, two fingers were two, one hand was five, one hand and a finger of the other hand were six, two hands were ten, two hands and a toe were eleven, two hands and a foot were fifteen, two hands and two feet were twenty; anything more was a great deal. It is always by using their fingers and their toes that the lowest savages count. Thus the figure, the most abstract idea that exists in the mind of the civilised, was at first, in the mind of the savage, the reflex of a material object. When we say or think of 1, 2, 5, 10, we see no object at all; the savage sees a finger, two fingers, a hand, two hands. (It is more than probable that the little children of the civilised as well as savages, still picture to themselves material objects when reckoning up numbers.) So true is this that the Roman figures, used by

civilised peoples for so long, before the introduction of the Arabian figures, were shaped after the hand. I is one finger, II are two fingers, V are a hand, of which the three middle fingers are lowered while the thumb and the little finger are held up; X are two Vs or two hands reversed.

Of these Paraguayan savages the Jesuits made clever workmen, capable of executing the most difficult tasks. This is what Charlevoix says of them:

“The Indians of the Missions possess in the highest degree the faculty of imitation. It is enough, for example, to show them a cross, a candlestick, a censer, for them to reproduce them, and it puzzles one to distinguish their work from the model. They make their musical instruments, most complicated organs, at a single inspection,—as well as astronomical spheres, Turkey carpets, and the most difficult things in manufacture.” (Xavier de Charlevoix, *Histoire de Paraguay*, Paris, 1757.)

The materialist d’Orbigny, who in 1832 visited the pueblos of Paraguay, disorganised and ruined after the expulsion of the Jesuits, marvelled at the churches that these savages had constructed and decorated with paintings and sculptures “in the style of the Middle Ages”.

Now, these trades and these arts, as well as the ideas corresponding to them, were not innate in the hand and the head of the savage Guaranys; they had been put in so to speak, as an air of Verdi is put into a barrel organ. It is through the education that the Jesuits gave them that they acquired these divers trades and diverse thoughts. Here we see a case of direct action of man on man. But are there not other means by which the organs and the brain of man may be perfected? Do not the phenomena of the natural and of the social environment, does not experience develop the technical capacity of his organs and modify his thoughts?

The idea of Justice which, according to Jaurès, lies dormant in the mind of the savage, did not creep into the human brain until after the institution of private property.

Savages have no idea at all of Justice; they even have no word to designate such an idea. At the most are they acquainted with the *lex talionis*, the blow for a blow, the eye for an eye, which after all is merely another form of the reflex movement that makes the eyelid blink when an object threatens the eye, or at limb become slack when it is struck. Amongst barbarians even, living in well-developed, but communist social environments, where in consequence private property has hardly had a beginning, the idea of Justice is very vague. In this connection I will quote you Sumner Maine’s opinion, the high philosophic value of which will not be disputed by Jaurès.

“Nor, in the sense of the analytical jurists”, says Maine, “is there *right* and *duty* in an Indian village-community; a person aggrieved complains not of an individual wrong but of the disturbance of the order of the entire little society. More than all, customary law is not enforced by a sanction. In the almost inconceivable case of disobedience to the award of the village council, the sole punishment, or the sole certain punishment, would appear to be universal disapprobation.” (H. S. Maine, *Village Communities in the East and West*.)

Locke, who, like the philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, used the deductive method employed in geometry, came to think that private property engendered the idea of justice. In his *Human Understanding* he expressly says that

“where there is no property there is no injustice, is a proposition as certain as any demonstration in Euclid: for the idea of property being a right to anything, and the idea to which the name injustice is given being the invasion or violation of that right . . .” (*An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV. Chap. III.)

If the idea of Justice, as Locke thought, can only appear after and as a consequence of private property, the idea of theft, or rather the tendency to take unthinkingly what one needs or desires, is on the contrary, well developed, before the institution of private property. The communistic savage and barbarian behave in regard to material goods as our savants and writers do in regard to intellectual goods: whenever they find them they take them, to use Molière’s expression. But this natural custom becomes theft, crime, from the time when common property is replaced by private property.

Into the head and heart of savages and barbarians common property put ideas and sentiments which bourgeois Christians, those sad results of private property, will find very strange.

Heckwelder, a Moravian missionary who in the 18<sup>th</sup> century lived fifteen years among North American savages, not yet corrupted by Christian and bourgeois civilisation, said:

“The Indians believe that the Great Spirit created the world and all that it contains for the common good of men; when he stocked the earth and filled the woods with game, it was not for the advantage of some, but of all. Everything is given in common to the children of men. Everything that breathes on the earth, everything that grows in the fields, everything that lives in the rivers and waters, belongs jointly to all, and everyone has a right to his share.

“With them hospitality is not a virtue but an imperative duty. They would go to rest without eating rather than be accused of having neglected their duties by not satisfying the needs of the stranger, the invalid, the necessitous, because these have a common right to be helped from the common fund; because the game with which they are nourished, if it was taken in the forest, was the property of all before the hunter captured it; because the vegetables and the maize that are offered grew in the common land.”

On his part, the Jesuit, Charlevoix, who also had lived among savages ungoverned by the virtues of Christian and property morality, says in his *Histoire de la Nouvelle France*:

“The fraternal disposition of the Redskins doubtless comes in part from the fact that *mine* and *thine*, those icy words, as St. John Chrysostom calls them,

are as yet unknown to the savages. The care that they take of orphans, widows, and the infirm, the hospitality they practise in so admirable a manner, are but a consequence of their view that everything ought to be common for all men.”

Private property, in establishing the distinction of mine and thine, not only insinuated the idea of justice in the mind of man, but slipped into his hearts sentiments which have so rooted themselves there that we believe them innate, and which I should scandalise you by mentioning. However it is well established that jealousy and paternal love are unknown to man so long as he lives in a communist state. Women and men are then polygamous. The woman takes as many husbands as she pleases and the man as many wives as he can, and travellers inform us that all these good folks live content and more united than the members of the sad and egoistic monogamic family. But from the time when private property is instituted, the man buys his wife and reserves for himself alone the enjoyment of his reproductive animal; jealousy is a property sentiment transformed. Not until there is private property for him to transmit does the father think of troubling about his child.

The ideas of Justice which encumber the minds of the civilised, and which are based on mine and thine, will vanish like a bad dream when common property shall have taken the place of private property.

Jaurès has told us that the ideas of Justice and Fraternity, coming into contradiction with the social environment, produced the movement of humanity; but if that were true there would have been no historic evolution, for man never would have emerged from the primitive communist environment, in which the idea of Justice does not and cannot exist, and in which the sentiments of fraternity can manifest themselves more freely than in any other social environment whatever.

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