

THE FALLACY OF PRIMITIVE COMMUNISM

IT has been suggested by writers of note that the next few decades will see an advance in the social sciences comparable to the advance which has already been made in our knowledge of the material sciences. In spite of the more pessimistic view, that prejudice and class interests must necessarily render a sane solution of our social problems impossible, there is a general tendency towards a co-ordination of the work of social scientists, and from the chaos of extravagant theories certain general principles are slowly but surely gaining acceptance by the majority of students in the fields of psychology, sociology, and economics.

Nowhere is this tendency more apparent than in social anthropology, the science which studies the social structure of primitive societies with a view to understanding the motives which actuate human beings reared in an environment totally different from our own. These studies are proving of great value in the solution of social problems, and the savage, instead of being dragged in as an afterthought to justify preconceived theories, is being studied for his own sake, and the results applied to more advanced societies.

The tendency to justify social hypotheses by a distortion of the facts of primitive life is nowhere more marked than in the field of primitive economics. On the one hand individualists have attempted to represent the savage as entirely guided by self-interest, while on the other their opponents, such as Engels, the friend and associate of Karl Marx, have attempted to establish the doctrine of 'primitive communism.' Both of these extreme views are artificial distortions of the facts of primitive life.

In effect, the theory of 'primitive communism' attempts to answer the objection of the opponents of a communistic state, that such a state is 'contrary to human nature,' in other words that it is psychologically impossible. Now the only absolutely conclusive answer to the contention that a certain state of society is impossible is to point out conditions under which such a state has actually existed or actu-

ally does exist, and the exponents of the communistic view have accordingly seized upon any facts, or alleged facts, which would support the view that savages live under a regime of 'primitive communism.' Fortunately such works as Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and Dr. Raymond Firth's *Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Maori* are beginning to bring us closer to the actual facts of savage life, and to present in a clear and impartial way the manner in which primitive man solves the problem of economic organization.

Many of the current fallacies concerning the so-called communistic societies arise from a confusion in the use of the term 'communism'; before we use any term we should ask ourselves exactly what we mean by it. The fact is that 'communism' as it is used to-day implies two things, which must be kept absolutely separate if we are to gain a clear understanding of the problem. These are: (i) a state of society in which there exists a greater equality in the distribution of wealth than in the present organization of Western civilization and (ii) the alteration of the organization of production, distribution and exchange in such a way that these functions shall be controlled in the interests of the community at large instead of being left to the self-interest of individuals. Applying these tests to primitive societies we may say that in general there tends to be a quite definite privileged class in regard to economic distribution, but that orientation of economic activity tends to be controlled, in the main, by the needs of society. In other words the first of our criteria of communism is not apparent whereas the latter is. Of course such generalisations, covering as they do a vast range of facts, must be used with caution, but the broad tendencies are apparent to an impartial observer.

A good example to consider is that of the Australian aborigines: among these people there exists what has been aptly termed a 'gerontocracy,' a system under which social control rests in the hands of the elders of the tribe. The reason for this state of affairs is immediately apparent when

we consider their nomadic mode of life: in times of scarcity the only thing which stands between the natives and starvation (in the arid central regions at anyrate) is the intelligence and resourcefulness of the more experienced members of the tribe. How is this greater value of the old men expressed in native custom? It finds expression in a variety of usages, an absolute control in matters of ceremonial, a great measure of respect, and, above all, *a greater share in the products of economic effort*. This applies mainly to normal times; during periods of stress and privation there is a greater tendency towards equality, and no one is allowed to starve. But the fact remains that there is very definite feeling that those individuals who are of the greatest value to society should constitute a privileged class. Among other peoples, of course, the criteria of rank are different, as in the deference paid to the institution of chieftainship in the islands of Polynesia, but the general principle of the privileged class is the same.

Turning to the organisation of economic activity we find a different state of affairs. The economic activity of an Australian blackfellow living in his native state is determined to a far greater extent than our own by pride in achievement, deference to custom and social obligations generally as opposed to self-interest of a purely economic character. But this question of economic motives is a confusing one—from one point of view all incentives boil down to 'self-interest' in one form or another. The point which we are trying to make is that production determined by a desire to accumulate wealth for personal consumption is less common among primitive people, or in other words that economic activity tends to be determined by the needs of the community at large rather than by the separate needs of its component individuals. But one of the needs of society is the maintenance of a privileged class, a fact which refutes the hypothesis of 'primitive communism.'

A less theoretical statement may help to make this clear; among most aboriginal tribes the older men possess a monopoly of women; they arrange the marriages of the

people and the institution of polygamy allows them to select for themselves the youngest, most attractive and most efficient wives, which in practice they do. Thus the older men have two, three or even more wives, while the younger men have none. Now marriage among the aborigines implies both privileges and obligations: a man must give frequent presents to his father-in-law, but his wife will probably, in turn, bear female offspring, who being betrothed in infancy, place an obligation on their husbands in turn to give presents to their father. Theoretically it would appear from this that the advantages and disadvantages of marriage cancel out, but in actual practice this is not the case since a man is generally younger than his father-in-law. This means that an old man's father-in-law is frequently dead, while a young husband must generally wait till his wife bears female offspring before he can avail himself to the full of the privileges of a father-in-law. The reservation is necessary because girls are sometimes betrothed before birth—a man will promise to a prospective son-in-law any female offspring which his wife may bear him. The obligations of a man to his wife's father are thus seen to be a means to the maintenance of a privileged class, that of the old men, and also to provide a stimulus to economic effort, since the obligation to give presents is rigidly enforced and this, in the last analysis, means productive activity on the part of the individual.

Such, then, are the facts of a primitive economic organization. A study of this organization is seen to be of value in showing that whereas production is for use and not for profit (in our sense of the word), the superior social value of a certain class of individuals is clearly expressed in the greater share of the good things of life which is allowed them. If we can draw any conclusion for our own society it is this: that if ever the control of economic activity is vested in the state, there must be some assurance that those individuals who for any reason are capable of being of exceptional service to the community, shall receive a markedly greater share of the products of industry than those whose productive capacity is not so great.

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