

THE MOST FITTING FIELD FOR THE STUDY OF MODERN DEVELOPMENT

<p>05- The serf of the middle-ages shows but as a 10- sorry figure, indeed, in all countries, as 15- compared with that splendid chivalry, whose 20- resplendent armour and noble individual 25- prowess have been the theme of so much 30- glorification. Yet, for centuries, these despised 35- churls provided in the form of food and wares, 40- furnished by the number of days' work due to 45- their lord for nothing, the means of providing 50- all the magnificence which decked out the 55- baron, the abbot, and the fair ladies of the 60- court. Everywhere, however, at the height of the 65- feudal domination, the handicraftsman, more especially at the later period which preceded its disruption, was a free man. The contrast between the position of such a man or the yeoman, and the villeins, was most striking in every respect. The latter were mere chattels: the former were independent men; more independent perhaps in England than the people as a body have ever been economically, socially, and politically, at any other period of our history.</p> <p>For in England — and this it is which renders our own country the most fitting field for the study of modern development — the enfranchisement of the peasantry and their settlement upon the land as free yeomen, took place at a much earlier date than in any other nation. These yeomen were in fact the mainstay of England for several hundred years, and their influence can be traced in our national history long before the enfranchisement of the serfs as a body. The // great risings, however, of the fourteenth century, secured for the mass of our people that freedom and well-being which made common Englishmen for at least two centuries the envy of Europe. Serfdom was almost entirely done away, men were masters of themselves, their land, and their labour. Labourers and craftsmen were alike well-paid, well-fed people, who were not only in possession of the land which they might occupy and till, but were also entitled to rights of pasturage over large tracts of common land, since robbed from their descendants by the meanness of an usurping class who made laws in their own favour to sanctify pillage.</p> <p>England, far more densely peopled at that time than is generally supposed, was in fact inhabited by perhaps the most vigorous, freedom-loving set of men the world ever saw, who, having shaken themselves free from the slavery of the feudal system, were still untrammelled by the worse slavery of commercialism and capital. The economical forms, the methods of production, were the direct cause of this universal well-being and sturdy independence. Instead of men working under the control of the landlord or the landlord-capitalist as slaves or serfs for the sake of wealth and profit for their owners, the yeomen were owners themselves of their own means of production, and produced for the use of the family, only paying a portion of such</p>	<p>70- production as tithes, or dues, or taxes. Rent, in the sense of a competition price paid for the occupation of land, was at this period almost unknown in Northern and Western Europe as well as in these islands.</p> <p>Production therefore being carried on for use, though // only in primitive fashion with small implements adapted to individual holding, most of the products being consumed or worked up into rude manufactures on the farm itself, only the superfluity after the yeoman and his family were well-fed and well- clothed came into exchange. And this exchange itself, like the production, was carried on by the individual. Craftsmen were economically as independent as the yeomen and free-labourers, though laws were made (happily for many generations without effect) to limit their powers of combination, and to keep down the rates of wages which either they or the agricultural labourers would command. They also were in control of their means of production, and what they made was the result of their own labour on raw materials, which they in turned exchanged for other goods made by men as free as themselves, or were paid for by the lord or abbot. Still the relations were in the main personal, and pecuniary, still a man who earned wages for a day was by no means forced to compete with his neighbour for hire by an employer as a wage-earner all his life through.</p> <p>The trade guilds which in the first instance were thoroughly democratic in their constitution, protected the craftsmen against unregulated competition, or from the attempt to oppress them in any way. Moreover, as it was easy then for a labourer to obtain a patch of land, and to remove himself wholly or in part from the wage-earners, so a journeyman apprentice starting in life as a mere worker could and generally did attain tot he dignity of a master craftsman in mature age. The amount of capital to be amassed ere a man could work for himself was so small that no serious barrier was // placed between the journeyman and independence; besides, the arrangements of the guilds were such that wherever a craftsmen [sic] wandered he was received as a brother of his particular craft. Although also the rest of Europe was behind England in the settlement of the people on the soil, the craft-guilds were even more important in the Low Countries and part of Germany in the Middle Ages than in England. Thus it should appear that in the record of feudal development the period reached in each country when the peasant was a freeman working for himself upon the land, and the craftsman was likewise a free man master of his own means of production represents the time of greatest individual prosperity for the people. [...] // [...]</p> <p>The Church as a collective body supplement- ed the needs of this thoroughly individualist society. The services rendered by the monas- teries, priories, and nunneries to the people in</p>
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<p>135 the shape of constant employment on their estates, of almsgiving, maintenance of hospitals, schools, inns, maintenance of roads, have been systematically depreciated by middle-class historians; but these semi-socialist bodies were of the highest value in the economy of the middle-ages, more especially in England, and the lands which they held were used and their revenues applied in such manner that during their most flourishing period the noblest institutions were kept up by their aid. Permanent pauperism was unknown, and vagrancy was charitably restrained so long as these institutions were in existence. The services rendered by them in the direction of art and letters it is needless to recount.</p> <p>140</p> <p>145 But at the risk of being compelled to repeat later what is urged here, it is well to consider at this point the effect which the full development of the individual man and his power over his own tools, materials, and the objects he worked upon, had upon art. The ordinary opinion seems to be that art is bred and sustained by the luxury resulting from the present state of society, with its monstrous contrasts of riches and poverty. A very brief survey will be enough to show the falsity of this notion. The slave-served society of the classical peoples intellectual and highly-refined but simple in life and free, in Greece at any rate, from what // is now called luxury, looked upon art as a necessity, and found no serious obstacle in the way of surrounding the daily life of man with beauty. The rigid caste system of the feudal hierarchy kept up the most violent arbitrary distinctions between classes, but had no temptation to extend those distinctions to the minds and imaginations of men, and no means whereby it could do so. Thus the artificer was left free to express, according to his capacity, the ideas which he shared with the noble, developing as a class a hereditary skill and dexterity in the handling of the simple tools of the time.</p> <p>160</p> <p>165 Under the craft-gilds of the latter middle-ages the industrial arts were divided rigidly into corporations, but inside those corporations division of labour was yet in its infancy; so that each fully instructed craftsman was master of his own handicraft, and was by all surrounding circumstances encouraged to be an <i>artist</i> whose labour could not be wholly irksome to him. By this means the taste and knowledge of what art was then possible were spread widely among</p> <p>175</p> <p>180</p>	<p>185 the people and became instinctive in them, so that all manufactured articles as it were grew beautiful in the unobtrusive and effortless way that the works of nature grow. The result of five centuries of this popular art is obvious in the outburst of splendid genius which lit up the days of the Italian Renaissance: the strange rapidity with which that splendour faded as commercialism advanced is proof enough that this great period of art was born not of dawning commercialism but of the freedom of the intelligence of labour from the crushing weight of the competition market, a freedom which it enjoyed throughout the middle ages. //</p> <p>190</p> <p>195 The exquisite armour of the knights, their swords and lances of perfect temper, the splendid and often humorous decorations of the stone and wood-work in the cathedrals, churches and abbeys, the illuminations of the missals, the paintings of the time, the manner in which beautiful designs and tracery nestled even in places where it might be thought that the human eye could rarely or never reach, nay, even such fragments of ordinary domestic furniture and utensils as have been preserved, all show that the art of the middle Ages [<i>sic</i>], like the art of Greece, was something loved and cherished and made perfect for its own sake, that beauty welled up unbidden from the spontaneous flow of the ideas of the time. But just at this period of the fullest individual perfection the necessities of competition, arising out of economical changes in the conditions of labour which have yet to be traced, gradually turned the workman from the mediæval artist-craftsman into the mere artisan of the capitalist system, and almost entirely destroyed the attractiveness of his labour; so that when about the end of the 17th century the work-shop system of labour which had pushed out of the gild system was struggling to perfect its speciality [<i>sic</i>], the division of labour namely, wherein the unit of labour is not a single workman but a group, it found the romance, the soul, both of the higher and the decorative arts, gone though the commonplace or body of them still existed.</p> <p>200</p> <p>205</p> <p>210</p> <p>215</p> <p>220</p> <p>225</p> <p>230</p> <p>235 How then was the artist-craftsman thus turned into a mere artisan? How did the competition arise in such shape that not free rivalry in the creation of beauty but fierce antagonism in the greed for gain became the rule of // production? Once more the economical forms changed and destruction of the old society was the inevitable result.</p>
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