WILEY

Review

Author(s): C. A. Foley

Review by: C. A. Foley

Source: *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 16 (Dec., 1894), pp. 701-704

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the Royal Economic Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2955921>

Accessed: 27-06-2016 07:13 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Royal Economic Society, *Wiley* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
The Economic Journal

ment, is prepared to sacrifice for his benefit all the profit that he would ordinarily make on his initial outlay. Can this be other than a charitable transaction? Beyond a doubt it is charity; and, if we may trust experience, most probably charity, or (if we may drop that word and use the better term relief) relief, in one of its most injurious forms. The question whether or not the system of employment-relief is really good is not argued in this book. It is taken for granted. The phrase 'not alms but work' is quoted here, as it often is, as a key to social reform. The words should run—'not alms without work, but alms in the guise of work.' That is the true rendering of the phrase, and thus rendered it represents with tolerable exactness just what, as a rule, we ought to avoid. All our general experience tends to show the injury and inutility of this pseudo-employment; and it is incumbent on those who now propose it as a remedy to prove that the evils that have hitherto accompanied it can be neutralised, and that we should not rather provide such 'relief' as is 'necessary' without setting on foot any large schemes of artificial employment, and in the case of the able-bodied advocate, at the utmost, an extremely limited policy of Poor Law intervention. But these, the fundamental issues, are not here discussed. Almost every important question is begged. Yet, after all, we would not speak entirely in dispraise of the book. Generally speaking it puts in a few words proposals for the relief of the unemployed and the unemployable which harmonise closely with the popular thought of the time, so far as this differs from the ordinary official programmes of socialism. It is a good summary of current popular suggestions.

C. S. LOCH

Primitive Civilisations ; or, Outlines of the History of Ownership in Archaic Communities. By E. J. SIMCOX. (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1894.) 2 vols.

THE literature of political economy has by this treatise, which is both political and economic, been singularly enriched. The result of protracted, assiduous, and conscientious compilation, it has the dual merit of being a valuable storehouse of reference and a very interesting exposition. To the economic student, hitherto much starved by a diet of Aristotle the moment he penetrates to the back of the feudal system, the gifted authoress has rendered the signal service of gathering from a very great number of treatises and monographs by leading specialists of the present day on the ancient history of China, Egypt, Babylonia, and the prehistoric populations of Asia Minor and the basin of the Mediterranean, all that throws light on the, *inter alia*, economic conditions—rural, industrial, commercial, and fiscal—of those peoples, and presenting them in an orderly and even fascinating

NO. 16.—VOL. IV

3 A

manner, giving from time to time a glance at the comparative evolution of similar conditions and their attendant problems in the modern centres of civilisation. In her conclusions she evinces no little philosophic breadth and insight, presaging upheavals 'unless the force of democratic feeling is enlisted in support of the present social order,' yet believing with serenity in the infinite possibilities of human self-adjustment and assimilation of a Better Thing, and in the power of such assimilation of the best in modern and ancient ideals to bring about some (relatively) 'final synthetic inspiration.' I said 'ancient ideals,' which is for her too wide. Notwithstanding many evidences of justice and fraternity adduced from among much that was unjust, cruel, and ignorant in early civilisations of the further East, either the heavy hand of tradition or implicit conviction forces her introductory observations into the restricted channel of Græco-Roman ideals and Semitic 'visions of spiritual realities,' as the only sources of future social harmony.

Respecting the particular points of economic interest that lie so thickly strewn in these closely packed, too closely printed, pages, it is only possible here to notice a few illustrations.

As is asserted in the introduction, 'we call it a failure now to acquiesce in a stationary state in which' the people 'should be only fed,' yet even this we know it is beyond the power of our present system to achieve. The problem may not have proved insoluble to the economic mechanism of some of these ancient societies, difficult as it is to venture on conclusions drawn largely from edicts and philosophies. It is said that Herodotus made a list of the various cases in which Egypt reversed 'the usages of every other nation'; and one among them was certainly the power of maintaining a population contented with the bare provision of board and lodging, without expectation or possibility of accumulation, or the extra luxury and comforts which accumulation brings. In China, laws were made to prevent accumulation in the hands of the few, and consequently the lower classes have always been in a fairly comfortable condition. They began, A.D. 817, to forbid any one, of whatever class, to keep in his own hands more than what would now be equivalent to £1,500; but it was subsequently increased to a far larger sum. In cases where misfortune had overtaken any one, his relatives were bound to assist him and prevent his being reduced to penury.

The conditions of primitive life in Egypt, at least among the labouring classes, were rigorously fixed, though the conditions themselves were by no means arduous as compared with those of other countries, since the productiveness of the land, and the peculiar fitness of the Nile Valley for the development of an agricultural race, enabled the inhabitants to 'gather the fruits of husbandry with little cost or labour.' In China the fertility was equally great, as may perhaps be inferred from the fact that land now capable of supporting two men in Europe will in that country maintain twenty.

Money was unknown in the earlier ages of Egypt, and a strict regard for political economy might forbid the use of the term 'wealth' to designate the riches of the Egyptian masters, who accumulated the overplus of the natural productions, which only later became of exchangeable value when commerce with Rome and other countries had been opened out. The economy of Egypt consisted of 'forced labour and subsistence wages'; yet Egypt flourished for three thousand years with a fixity of tenure never attained elsewhere. It is difficult to assign any reason for the long continuance of this monarchy; but there can be little doubt that it was in a measure due to the fact that the king and his nobles were more or less content with the simple pleasures of life, and did not seek to amuse themselves by complicating its machinery. Indeed the Egyptian idea of enjoyment must have been of a limited nature, when the great man, having provided for the needs of this life, used his surplus accumulation of food and property for the support of labourers employed in building monuments and graves for the long ages when he and his should be numbered among the dead. The long duration of the Chinese empire was doubtless due to the general welfare of the people, which may be attributed to the prohibition of an over-accumulation of money in the hands of the few, and the consequent impossibility that one class should oppress another. The author gives a pretty picture of Egyptian plenty (pp. 82, 83), and the jokes and songs of the labourers in the midst of their daily toil. If the end of politics be, as some assert, to produce the greatest amount, not of wealth, but of happiness, this end seems to have been more successfully attained in these early ages of China and Egypt than at any later period. It is curious therefore to read, a few pages farther on (p. 88), of a strike among the Egyptian workmen employed in the building of temples, whose rations were distributed on a diminishing scale; and it is somewhat significant, in the light of later times, that the first strike should have occurred in the reign of the king (Rameses III.) whose 'lavish benefactions to the gods seemed to have paved the way for political as well as social revolution.'

In these days, when women in manufacturing towns are working for starvation wages in the midst of filthy and unhealthy surroundings, when the working man is making an outcry against the competition of the woman wage-earner, it is interesting to find that it was the custom to employ women in factories in such remote times—a circumstance significant of the independence of their life. This is also shown in the position of substantial equality of the wife in relation to her husband, for which Egypt was unique in ancient and in modern history. Elsewhere too the woman's rights movement does not appear to be such a modern idea as many people suppose, for the Empress of China, Wu-heon, who died in A.D. 705, is said to have established examinations for women, with a view to admitting them into the civil service.

The chapters on commercial laws and contracts and Chinese finance are very interesting, and the contrast between those of Egypt,

China, and Mesopotamia particularly so. In Egypt the value of any commodity was measured by a given weight of copper wire, which was merely used as a standard; the Chinese used copper rings without device as a medium of exchange, and no other seems to have been used until about B.C. 700, when metal knives with a rude inscription were substituted, and served two purposes, exchange and daily use. It is to be observed that 'coins of all kinds were issued during the feudal period by individual merchants, trading firms, guilds, and private families, as well as by cities. And the legends seem to show that, like the first issues of paper money many centuries later, the coin was put forward rather as a bond—something returnable, a promise to value to such an amount—than as a mere medium of exchange for universal currency.' In Babylonia, money was weighed and grain was measured. The Chinese invented letters of credit, exchequer bonds, and bank-notes about A.D. 200, and it is incomprehensible why they should have been so slow in adopting the use of money. A singular feature in the transactions of these times was the sense of justice, as well as confidence in the honour of the parties concerned. Here again we have another instance how differently the Egyptian viewed matters from the rest of the world. For whereas the purchaser in ancient and modern times says: 'This is mine, I have bought it for so much,' etc., in Egypt the vendor alone speaks, while the purchaser is silent: 'I have given thee so-and-so; it is thine,' and stipulates penalties against himself and his descendants if they question the validity of the transfer.

The ordinary rate of commercial interest seems to have been 30 to 33 per cent., but in more recent times money invested in houses or land seldom brought in more than 9 or 10 per cent. But land being a permanent provision, there was a reluctance to alienate it, and cultivators appear to have adopted a scheme for preserving their right to it by a system of antichretic mortgage, which would be a boon to the Irish peasant of to-day. The antichretic mortgage of Babylonia, without rent for house and without interest for money, was held to be most dignified, though it would scarcely suit the mortgagee of these times.

In China, the whole object of the government seems to have been to encourage the people to become agriculturists, as was the case in Egypt, and in a far less degree in Babylonia. In the latter country there seems to have always been a larger urban population, which led to greater commercial enterprise both in surrounding districts and with foreign countries.

It is interesting to note that the cultivation of the tea-plant is mentioned as early as A.D. 350, and a remarkable fact in connection with this is that from this time drunkenness decreased. The author also attributes the freedom from epidemics enjoyed by the Chinese to the habit of drinking such quantities of hot tea, as they thus seldom imbibed unboiled water.

C. A. FOLEY