

## SOCIOLOGY AND THE EPIC.

WRITERS on sociology and investigators in kindred fields often make allusion to Homer or other of the natural epics to support their theses. There is no doubt as to the value of these poetical documents of the past as affording well-nigh indispensable material for the student of the history of civilization. But, unfortunately, selections are too often made in an uncritical spirit; context is lost to view, and isolated passages or phrases are interpreted under bias. This brings the whole science of society into disrepute with philologists and others. A few cases of this sense-distortion discredit many valuable and laboriously attained results in perhaps entirely different fields of sociological research.

This uncritical citation is unworthy of the notable scientists who occasionally are found to be at fault, but it is, in a certain sense, natural enough, especially when a man is gathering material from so many and so diverse sources. The gain to sociology would be great if the workers on the grand scale could have at their service separate monographs which would undertake impartially to gather and systematize the sociological material in such documents as the Vedas, the Zend-Avesta, the Eddas, the Hebrew Scriptures, the Kalevala, the Nibelungen Lied, the Homeric poems, and the like.

It is here intended briefly to outline some of the characteristics of the Iliad and Odyssey which render their evidence as to the civilization they portray especially reliable.

In the first place, the record in question is wonderfully free from bias. Epics in general evince the sympathetic treatment which a man accords to the civilization of his own people. They contain none of the subjective or "ethnocentric" elements which so often dictate the attitude and vitiate the evidence of an observer who himself belongs to a more advanced culture-stage. Homer presents no exception to this general characteristic of the epic; there can scarcely exist a doubt in the mind of one

who knows Homer intimately that his evidence as to the life called Homeric is that of a sympathetic, first-hand observer. Whether Homer be one or many, there are no marks of antiquarian reconstruction about his pages.

In addition to this, Homer's poems are free from certain defects common to other such chronicles of culture. Homer occupies no distinctly partisan standpoint which would tend to obscure the picture of Homeric civilization, or to exhibit it from a restricted point of view. The Vedas and the Laws of Manu are taken up with the glorification of the Brahmans, and, to a lesser degree, of the Kchatryas, or military caste; the Zend-Avesta is in great part a system of Zoroastrian liturgies; the military and the sacerdotal alternately overweigh one another in the Hebrew Scriptures; the Eddas, the Chanson de Roland, and the Arthurian legends teem with the deeds and praises of militarism. In most cases, the chronicler of a civilization has himself belonged to a certain social caste or class, or has been vitally interested in the predominance of certain elements in the population; thus arose in records the sacerdotal or military bias, according as the priesthood dominated or was subordinated to the warrior class.

There is little such bias in the Iliad and Odyssey; less in the latter than in the former. The Homeric Greeks, though an intensely religious people, were under the blight of no priestly domination; the common man might discharge his own obligations to the gods without a mediator. Thus the condition which determines the rise of a sacerdotal class, and so of a religious bias in historical records, was absent. And the evidence in the poems themselves goes to show that priests were mostly nobles and warriors, and generally elected or chosen; never, I believe, do we find the priestly function hereditary. There is no evidence to suggest that the early Greek bard (such as was Homer himself) was a priest or connected with religion in any special way.

If there is any bias, it is military, and to be noted chiefly in the Iliad. It is true that upon the battlefield the chief alone is prominent: the common soldier, as in the Nibelungen Lied and the Russian epic songs, counts for little. Several of the books

of the Iliad are taken up almost wholly in describing the glorious adventures of certain great heroes. The man of the people is treated with scant courtesy as compared with the prince ; in war times he is to have no individual will of his own. Still, this is not necessarily an over-preponderance of the military spirit. All early peoples, except perhaps the Phœnicians, were led by the conditions of existence to submit absolutely to military jurisdiction, particularly in time of war, when power must be lodged in the hand which was strong to defend or to conquer. Some military bias might be conceded in the case of the Iliad ; and yet upon examining the power of the king, who was the war-chief *par excellence*, we find that, even in time of war, militarism was glad to range itself on the side of the popular will. The center of gravity of the system of rule, in time of war, lay in the council of chiefs ; yet chiefs and king were guided largely by the approval or disapproval of the whole people, convoked in assembly. Before the people the king was often censured and humbled.

Many other facts might be cited from the poems of Homer to show the singular freedom from bias, religious or other, which renders the Iliad and Odyssey capable of presenting a universal view of the civilization in which they rose. It is also true that these records have been singularly preserved in the vicissitudes of transmission across the centuries, from the introduction of later, unhomogeneous material, and the like. To the Greeks of the ages succeeding the appearance of these epics they were a whole literature and law.<sup>1</sup> They came under the strong sanction of custom and religion ; they embodied the philosophy of living which had commended itself to the experience of older and therefore wiser generations. They were cosmography, history, genealogy, geography, law, morals, and all the rest, to the later Greek. Changing of the text of such documents would not easily be tolerated ; the trifling interpolations asserted by some Homeric critics affect in no way the genuine character of the whole. And, even though certain parts of Homer may be philologically regarded as earlier or later than others, from the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. R. C. JEBB, *Introduction to Homer* (Boston, 1887), chap. iii.

standpoint of social science there are no reasons for assigning the two poems, or different parts of the same poem, to different culture-epochs. Sociologically viewed, the poems present a quite homogeneous culture-stage, allowing, of course, for quite apparent foreign influences and importations, seen chiefly in the industrial organization. What comes from external sources, Phœnician or other, in no way vitiates the clearness of the picture of Homeric society.

An example of such vitiation and introduction of incongruous elements is afforded in the case of the German and Russian epic narratives. The rugged pagan grandeur of the Nibelungen Lied is marred by the introduction of a formal, ill-understood Christianity. Kriemhild, it is said, "scarcely ever slept over the matins," and her brothers and Hagen seem to have been careful to observe the precepts of the church; with this may be contrasted the savage outbreak of murder and vengeance which forms the plot of the gloomy epic. The Russian epic songs are still more crude in their adoption of an alien faith; in them, for instance, Elijah (Ilya, the Old Cossack) becomes a god, essentially pagan; Christianity is accepted in a barbarous form and serves merely to obscure the picture of the genuine Slavic culture-stage.

Homer, then, has a good right to be called universal and unbiased. He sustains this claim in a manner quite astonishing to the student. No side or phase of life is too humble for the poet to know and draw upon: the beggar, the widow and orphan, and the rich prince are found side by side among his *personae*; the huntsman, the shepherd, the artisan, and the merchant act before the reader their several parts in life, as do the royal warrior and traveler. The domain of the humble arts then known is seized upon in its minute details, and the wonderful creations of foreign craftsmen are described as by a somewhat bewildered and half-understanding, but none the less keen, observer. Characteristics of animals, wild and tame, are accurately portrayed, and the passions and motives of men present no secret to the poet's eye. A wealth of comparison

reveals an active and all-seeing mind, capable of reproducing both the brighter and more sober tints of man's life in society.

Homer thus affords a truly historical document for the study of civilization, even though dates cannot be assigned which will accurately locate the Homeric age in human history. For the student of human culture the period of Homeric life is fairly well located. The importance of these documents cannot be questioned; without Homer's evidence, our ignorance of our entire Aryan past would be indeed lamentable, in spite of the wonderful services of archæology. Depending upon Homer's record, which we judge to be remarkably reliable, we are enabled to understand in generous measure one of the greatest embryonic civilizations of all time

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