

SOCIAL THEORY

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Social Theory by G. D. H. Cole

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G. D. H. COLE

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BY

G. D. H. COLE

FELLOW OF MAGDALEN COLLEGE, OXFORD

*Author of "Self-Government in Industry,"
"Labour in the Commonwealth," etc.*



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SOCIAL THEORY

CHAPTER I

THE FORMS OF SOCIAL THEORY

MEN do not make communities—they are born and bred into them. Every individual at his birth is flung into a social environment, and his life's work from infancy is to make the best of that environment for himself and for his fellows. As he grows to fuller consciousness, his environment gradually expands. He becomes aware of the family, contact with which furnishes his first social experience. At the same time, he becomes aware also of a larger world outside the family, a world of wisdom, of things seen from windows and on journeys from home, a world which slowly assumes definite shapes and takes on human characteristics of neighborhood and similarity. As he grows older, the fact of organization in this world becomes apparent, and school, church, club and other social institutions claim him, and assume a part in his life. By the time he reaches manhood, he has drunk in and accepted the fact of the world, his environment, as a complex of individuals and associations, of customs and institutions, of rights

and duties, of pleasures, pains, desires, hopes and fears, strivings and attempts to understand all centering round this complex and all raising the more or less insistent question of his place in it, and his relation to it.

Of course, this process is widely different in the case of different individuals, types and classes. Hitherto, men have usually been brought far sooner and more completely into contact with an organized social environment than women, whose experience has not been allowed to expand with the same freedom. Again, the opportunities of the rich and of the educated classes for contact with the world without have been far fuller than those of the workers or of the lower middle class. The workers, however, through their Trade Unions, clubs and other societies have shared with the upper classes what is largely denied to the lower middle class—the opportunity for free association with a communal object, and the consequent appreciation of the social structure of the world around them. The Trade Union is the working-class equivalent for the upper-class public school and university, which are the scenes not so much of education, as of the social training of a ruling caste.

The generality of men and women take their experience of the social scene around them unphilosophically. They do not reflect upon it; they merely accept it. But that does not make it any the less a real experience, or any the less a part of their mental equipment. They are born into a complex society, and by a natural process that complex society becomes a part of their lives—as

real a *Weltanschauung* as any Teutonic philosopher ever imagined.

The task which I propose to attempt in this book is that of setting down, as clearly as I can, the social content of this *Weltanschauung* of the ordinary man, not of course limiting myself to what he sees, but endeavoring to put together the social contents of various experiences, and to make of them, as far as they form one, a coherent and consistent whole. What is the content of our social experience—what is the relation between the various fragmentary experiences and contacts of and with individuals, associations and institutions which we come upon in our day-to-day life in Society? What, in short, is the structure of the half-organized and half-conscious community of which we form a part?

Perhaps that last question gives rather too large and inclusive an idea of the purpose which I have in mind. It is not *all* experience that I mean to deal with, but only social experience. Social Theory is not concerned directly with all the actions of individual men, but mainly with their actions taken in concert through some temporary or permanent organized group, and with the actions of such groups as they affect and react upon the individual. The unorganized, personal conduct of individual men will be always present as the background of our study, though it will only be treated incidentally in relation to its social content.

Even with this limitation, the scope which I have taken for this book will seem to many people far too wide. Social Theory, especially under its name of "Political Theory," has often been regarded as

having to do mainly with one particular association, the State, and with its relation to the individual. Recent theory, however, has been moving more and more to the conclusion that this definition of the scope of the subject is wrong, because it is fundamentally untrue to the facts of social experience.

I do not mean, of course, to deny that it is possible to write books about, and even to make a distinct and separate study of, the nature of the association called "The State," and its relation to the individual. That is, of course, a perfectly legitimate and necessary inquiry. But I do absolutely deny that any study of the relations of State and individual can furnish even the groundwork for a general survey of social experience, and that it, taken by itself, can penetrate to the heart of the question of man's place in Society. It is simply not true that the social relations of which a man is most directly and constantly aware are, under normal conditions, his relations with the State; and it is still less true that these relations furnish the whole, or even the greater part, of his social experience.

Society is a very complex thing. Apart from personal and family relations, almost every individual in it has, from childhood onwards, close contacts with many diverse forms of social institution and association. Not only is he a citizen or subject of his State, and of various local governing authorities within it: he is also related to the social order through many other voluntary or involuntary associations and institutions. He is, maybe, a worker in a factory, mine or office, a member of a