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The Economic Position of Backward Peoples.

WHEN the British Association visited South Africa in 1905, the country was still suffering from the effects of the Boer War. Of the many problems which had demanded solution, the most acute had been that of labour. In the efforts to restore social and economic equilibrium, the mining industry had made demands upon the native labour supply which it had been unable to meet, and after strenuous opposition and an acrimonious exchange of opinion from opposing camps, not only in South Africa but also in Great Britain, a solution had been sought by the introduction of Chinese labour—a solution which failed, perhaps happily for the future of the country. The difficulties of the situation were not relieved by the settlement in South Africa of large numbers of natives of India, who indeed both at that time and afterwards added to the gravity of the situation in further complicating the relations of the white and coloured populations both politically and economically.

In the period which has elapsed between the first and second visits of the British Association to South Africa, there have been many changes, but fundamentally the situation in regard to the racial question remains unaltered. Notwithstanding the attempts which have been made to secure some *modus vivendi* between white and black which will secure for the latter opportunity for social, economic, and political development with due regard to the interests of South Africa as predominantly a white man's country, the problem has still to be solved.

On one side the native question in South Africa has naturally much in common with the situation that arises elsewhere whenever a backward people is brought into contact with European civilisation. The exploitation of the resources of the country brings a demand for cheap and plentiful labour which the native is induced to satisfy by the acquisition of new desires for the objects, material and other, which are brought within his reach by European culture. These are not necessarily in themselves entirely harmful, although experience in the past has shown that more often than not the result of the contact has been disastrous. The provision of facilities for a higher standard of living, an improved system of sanitation and hygiene, a medical service, and opportunities for education, are now generally recognised as normal activities of the administration in our dependencies which have any appreciable native population.

The practice of earlier days ignored the interests of the natives, leaving them more or less at the mercy of the exploiting trader or settler. It made little or no effort to protect them against the vices of civilisation except in so far as was necessary to safeguard the white population. On the other hand, the modern type of humanitarian administration is not without its drawbacks. Too often it leads to the disintegration of native tribal organisation and the breaking up of the indigenous moral and religious code. It is one of the problems of the administrator to provide against the dangers of this disintegration. In any case, it can no longer be regarded as an adequate solution that the native should remain a hewer of wood and drawer of water under the white man's control, however benevolent; nor does the provision of facilities for education, even technical education, along the lines of our civilisation, meet the needs of the case, as was once thought. Development must be along lines concordant with native culture.

In most tropical countries, climatic conditions make it inevitable that the European should be only a small and transient element in the population. Yet a day must come when the development of tropical countries of suitable soil will no longer be a question of the individual gain of a pioneer settler, but the outcome of a world-wide necessity created by the normal increase in world population. This is a fundamental factor in the situation which ultimately must have a decisive effect in shaping the destiny of the backward peoples. On a long view, reservations or any other means of segregation can at best only be regarded as temporary protective measures for educative purposes; in the end, native populations, to use a convenient conventional term, must come under the full play of economic forces and enter into competition with the rest of the world as productive units under penalty of extinction. It is both a moral and a political duty, in the broader sense, incumbent upon the advanced peoples who are in contact with backward races, that they should prepare them for the ordeal. They must so guide their development that, while they are guarded from the effects of the premature breaking up of their own civilisation, they may be trained gradually to take their place in the economic system of the peoples of the world.

The danger of any attempt at premature social and economic development of native populations was one point which was particularly stressed by Mr. Henry Balfour when speaking at a discussion on "The Economic Competition between Advanced

and Backward Peoples" which took place at a joint meeting of Sections F (Economics) and H (Anthropology) on July 25 at Cape Town during the recent meeting of the British Association. Though it was intended that the discussion should deal with general principles rather than particular instances, it was inevitable that the difficulties of the situation in South Africa should take a prominent place. Many of these added point to Mr. Balfour's remarks.

In opening the discussion, Prof. H. Clay pointed out that while economic competition between advanced and backward peoples is possible without their being in propinquity, if they are in contact this adds the colour of emotion to the difficulties of the economic competition. Here he placed his finger upon one of the fundamental problems of the situation. Racial antagonism, always acute in such conditions, is emphasised by the colour bar. As he pointed out, backward peoples lack power of direction and, on the whole, take over the simpler processes from the more advanced peoples, freeing the latter for more advanced industries.

Now while it would be possible to point to areas, especially areas such as West Africa in which the white population is relatively small, where this principle, it may be hoped, is leading to the gradual development of native capabilities with a minimum of dislocation, in South Africa, an area with a comparatively long history of white settlement behind it and a large population of detribalised natives, the black comes into competition with the poorer class of white, and tends to displace this class on the economically unsound practice of less pay for coloured labour. It is encouraging from some points of view that among the more skilled coloured labourers some may now earn more than a white. In other words, the black, in the play of political and economic forces, is coming to earn as a producing unit without regard to his colour.

To sum up the discussion in one general impression, it would almost be fair to say that the social and economic problem of South Africa is the poor white rather than the black. Notwithstanding the grave signs of unrest among the natives which have been apparent recently, and especially during the past few weeks, the whole economic situation would appear to be changing slowly in favour of the native population. Yet much ground has to be covered before anything like equilibrium is attained, and whether that is desirable is a social and political question which raises entirely different issues. Here we enter on the field of emotion.