

THE WORLD IN TRANSITION

SINCE M. Ferdinand Lot's vast survey¹ of 'the most difficult problem of history' was begun, in 1913, and even since the completion of the French version, in 1921, the movement of events and thought has given it an actuality once suspected only by a few. M. Lot is at pains to discount facile comparisons, pointing out that an economy based on usury is the antithesis of an economy based on credit, that the organisation of the Roman Empire, developed from the city-state and over-ruled by the army, in spite of superficial resemblances, differs radically from any modern government, that the exhaustion of economic resources is not to be feared in the present world; and yet, one cannot read without a continual and uncomfortable sense of precedent and analogy. A footnote, 'this was written in 1914,' has to qualify the statement that progressive economic downfall 'is a very surprising phenomenon to us, who are accustomed to an ever-growing prosperity.'

As M. Lot shows, even before the barbarian invasions of the fifth century, the Roman Empire was only a 'ruin in repair,' disintegrating, in spite of the herculean efforts of a Diocletian, a Constantine, a Theodosius, through 'the dissolution of its vital forces'. Wealth is drained away through the growth of 'tentacular' cities; the currency, thrice restored, grows increasingly debased and scarce, and ends by disappearing altogether: taxation becomes a crushing burden, and Diocletian seeks in vain to fix maximum

¹ *The End of the Ancient World and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages*. By Ferdinand Lot, Membre de l'Institut, Professor in the University of Paris. Translated by Philip Leon, M.A., and Mariette Leon, M.A., docteur d'université. (Kegan Paul; 21/- net.)

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prices for provisions, salaries, and articles of common use. The establishment of a rigid caste system is a final and desperate effort to stave off the paralysis of social and economic life; the official is bound to his post, the artisan and merchant to his trade, the peasant to the land; till the aristocracy, finding all other sources of wealth exhausted, forsake the cities, fortifying themselves in great, self-contained estates, when the return to 'natural' economy is complete. Meanwhile, public spirit vanishes. Thought loses its power, the hand its cunning. In literature, the imitation of the classics leads to a literary language divorced from the common speech, and consequently, with a few rare exceptions, literary production is stillborn. In art, the drill replaces the chisel, and all inspiration is exotic, from the Persian East.

Contrary to popular belief, M. Lot proves that the barbarians brought not regeneration, but only accelerated dissolution. Goths, Lombards, even the Franks, for whom 'the highest destiny was in store after the disintegration of the ancient world', bring no positive contribution to failing civilisation. Between the Roman age and the true Middle Ages (characterised by the play of the three forces of Islam, the Papacy, and the Feudal System), there is sheer discontinuity, a 'transformation as phenomenal as if a sleeper, on waking, should see other stars shining above his head.'

M. Henri Berr, in an interesting preface, introduces M. Lot as 'one of the masters who have given to French erudition its perfect sureness of method and its rigorous precision', and it does not need the vast bibliography of 742 volumes to show with what scrupulous labour the author has addressed himself to his task. The book forms part of a series, 'L'Evolution de l'Humanité,' published in English, with additions, as 'The History of Civilisation,' a synthesis of the history of mankind. Unfortunately, the positivist

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tradition still informing the main French school of history does not lend itself to true synthesis, and results as a rule in what Croce has brilliantly called 'philological' as opposed to 'philosophical' history. The spirit that will quicken the dry bones is wanting. There are signs of a certain anti-clericalism in the series as a whole—in the attribution, for instance, of the three volumes of the early history of Christianity to M. Guignebert, the most violent anti-Catholic of the Sorbonne. From this, M. Lot's earnest devotion to truth saves him. He appreciates the civilising role of the Church, he rejects the theories that would make Constantine's conversion mere policy, and he pays welcome tribute to the literary value of the Christian authors—to Tertullian, 'who was not inferior to any of the writers of the golden age, whether Cicero or Juvenal,' to St. Augustine, 'who belongs to universal history,' and to Prudentius, 'the only lyric poet since Horace.' Nevertheless, there are questions which, as he himself confesses, present difficulties to 'one who is not a believer,' and the attitude of the *libre-penseur* (which he kept so scrupulously in abeyance in his lectures, that it comes as a surprise to at least one of his past students), reveals itself in certain omissions, under-estimations, or questionable judgments. Thus the inward dynamism of the great spiritual currents, and especially of Christianity itself, escapes him, and in consequence his valiant endeavour to 'interiorize' history, to show the 'renovation in the world within,' must appear incomplete.

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