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FOREIGN.

Translated for the American Register.

OF ENGLAND AND ENGLISHMEN.

From the French of J. B. Say, Author of a Treatise on Political Economy.

The long interruption of the communications between France and Great Britain, has rendered very valuable the few moments elapsed since the peace. We have been at liberty to seek, on the other side of the channel, an explanation of several phenomena, the results of which only were known to us; and to measure the lever which more than once has raised Europe.

The prodigious influence exerted by the British nation on the continent is not to be traced to her military force, or indeed to her navy. Nor is it to be attributed to British gold; for, ever since the year 1797, Great Britain has had no other than paper money, which does not rest upon any metallic security; and perhaps of all the nations in the world, England, considering every thing, owns the least quantity of the precious metals. The wealth and the credit of this nation have worked the wonders which we have witnessed, and as those powerful arms are the result of her whole public economy, it is the system of her economy which is her characteristic feature, and which deserves to fix our attention.

Until the year 1814, France who had the ascendancy on the continent, and Great Britain who had the same ascendancy at sea, could not fairly be said to have come to a direct, close contest, and as neither their existence, nor indeed their power, was endangered by the numerous engagements which they had with each other on both elements, however much humanity may deplore the effect, those engagements can be considered in no other light than as skirmishes. But their total result has been to deprive England for nearly twenty years, of her easy and regular communications with the continent, and France of almost all her maritime relations. The colonies separated from the mother-country, have either rendered themselves independent, or become a prey to the British; and all the commerce beyond seas has fallen into their hands. And, if we except a small number of straggling vessels, most of which even could not escape them, it was in their ships, or at least by their permission, that the merchandise of Asia and America was brought to our quarter of the globe, and that the produce of the European soil and industry found its way to the other parts of the world. Whether this preponderance have been confessed or not, whether this commerce was carried on by smuggling or licenses, in disguise or openly, still such is the fact.

What have been the consequences of this monopoly? The commercial profits of Great Britain have increased in a wonderful degree. More than twenty thousand vessels of all nations, have entered every year the ports of Great Britain. The wealthiest merchants of Holland, Bremen, Lubeck and Hamburgh, terrified at the approach of a conqueror, who advanced not only with cannon but *systems*, took refuge in England, and carried with them their capitals. Commercial enterprises multiplied; a greater number of agents of every description, from the supercargo to the porter, found employment; and as families augment in proportion to the means afforded to procure a livelihood, the population of the maritime cities of Great Britain increased in a very remarkable degree. London is no longer a city: it is a province covered with houses. Glasgow, which in the year 1791, contained a population of only 66,000 inhabitants, has now 110,000: Liverpool, which in 1801, reckoned 77,000 inhabitants, contains now 94,000: Bristol in the same space of time has advanced from 63 to 76,000 souls.

The establishment of docks and warehouses free from custom house duties, in all these ports, facilitated the distribution throughout Europe, of the goods which arrived there from every corner of the world, and the exportation of the produce of the interior was encouraged by the drawbacks. But another cause which had never been thought of, favoured this immense commerce still more.

After Bonaparte had succeeded at last, by gradual encroachments, in usurping all power in France, his restless activity, the gigantic project of universal domination, made every people of Europe, one after another, an enemy to France. Republican France had no enemies but kings. Under Bonaparte, nations became her adversaries. Those who appeared to be the allies of Bonaparte, were his secret enemies. The abominable system by which immense armies are made to subsist at the expense of the country which they occupy, whether friend or foe, had by degrees heightened this enmity into rage. But Europe exhausted by long and obstinate wars, compelled, when she dared to resist, to oppose a whole population under arms, to an invading population, could not support the expenses of so difficult a defence. Nothing but the most prodigiously active industry, could produce annually, the means of defraying the immense cost of wars, such as those which have been waged for fifteen years past.

All the countries already invaded, and those threatened with invasion, without being partial to England, were yet compelled to look to her for subsidies. British agents spread over every accessible part of the continent, and in the allied armies, in Portugal, in Spain, in Germany, forced to procure either in kind, or in cash, all the succours which Great Britain had engaged to furnish, offered their drafts on London, an operation which rendered bills of exchange payable in England, abundant on the continent, and this lowered the exchange to such a degree, that a pound sterling, which at first was equal to twenty-four francs, could, for a while, be bought on the continent, at from sixteen to seventeen francs.*

The same depreciation obtained with respect to the currency of Hamburgh, Vienna, and Lisbon.

What was the result?

Every speculator of whatever nation, could draw goods from England, and procure at a profit, the money with which he was to pay for them. If he bought in Birmingham goods, to the amount of a pound sterling, instead of giving twenty-four francs French for the pound sterling, which he was to remit for the goods, he had to pay at most, eighteen francs, so that he could well agree to make no profit on the goods; nay more, he could even agree to lose upon them, since by the exchange alone, he gained twenty-five per cent. or one fourth of the sum to be remitted. We ought not then to be surprised at the activity of the British manufacturers at certain times, and at the increase observable in the population of both their manufacturing, as well as commercial cities, although in these last in a less remarkable degree.

Such are the causes of the progress made during the war by the commerce and manufactures of Great Britain; But this is not all.

The population of the cities increasing with the profits of industry, the demand for all articles of food increased likewise. Wheat, the average price of which in 1794, was 56 shillings the quarter, (about 445 pound of 8 ounces,) was sold in 1813, as high as 136 shillings.

This enormous price having considerably increased the profits of the farmers, by a necessary consequence, the rent of the farms advanced at the renewal of every lease, and both farmers and proprietors made considerable gains.

But whilst the war induced this forced exertion of British industry, the British themselves derived but little advantage from it. The taxes and loans wrested from them all the profits. The taxes weighed at once upon the labours of all classes, and robbed them of the best portion of their earnings; and the loans absorbed in part, the savings of those bold adventurers, of those knowing speculators, who were on the watch to make the most of circumstances.

The facility with which the government could obtain loans, that is to say, spend any sum provided it could pay the interest on the same, led to the most enormous prodigality. The expenses of the war were greater to England than to any other nation. In the first place, the administration, in what relates to the purchase of necessary supplies, suffered, as well as every other consumer, by the increased price of all articles; of which increased price, itself was the first cause. Great Britain has to pay not only for her own supplies, but for those of her allies; not only the stipend of her own armies, but those of many others. The military and naval forces of Great Britain are scattered all over the globe.

Supplies to be sent, magazines to be formed in Asia or America, cost twice as much as the same would cost in Europe. Every soldier sent there, costs as much as two soldiers near home; and this is a great advantage secured for ever to the United States, in their quarrels with G. Britain.

I speak not here of the abuses in expense; they are carried to a most scandalous height; nor of ancient abuses, which have crept in by degrees; nor of late ones, which have been introduced on purpose; nor or of those which are pointed out, and inveighed against, by the opposition party, because none but the friends of the ministry profit by them; nor of those upon which all parties are silent, because they are countenanced by the national vanity. I speak of the whole together, the result of which is, that, although taxes have quadrupled since the year 1793, the expenses of each year have progressively exceeded the amount of the revenue; —that it became necessary to provide for this progressive deficit by loans more considerable from year to year, and which have ultimately carried the principal of the debt of Great Britain, to the enormous sum of seven hundred and seventy-seven millions, four hundred and sixty thousand pounds sterling; the annual interest of which, added to the current expenses, rendered, in the year 1813, the total amount of the public expenses of the central government no less than the incredible sum of one hundred and twelve millions, three hundred and ninety-one thousand pounds sterling.

One is apt to conceive himself mistaken, in contemplating such a frightful result for the expenses of one single year, which, according to all appearances, has been exceeded by the expenses of 1814, and still more by those of 1815. But this statement is founded on official communications, and attested by writers devoted to the British administration.

Of this amount of annual expense, about sixty-nine millions sterling, were supplied by the taxes of the year. The rest was procured from loans and anticipations; in other words, about one milliard, seven hundred millions of francs have been raised upon the revenues, or if you please, on the annual profits of the British nation, and one milliard* on its capital or savings, and that too, independent of the taxes which the nation pays for local expenses, for public worship, and for the poor, which, as every one knows, amount to considerable sums. So that, it is not perhaps far from truth, to declare, that the British government devours one half of the revenues which spring from the aggregate produce of the soil, of the capital, and of the industry, of the British nation.

In the moral, as in the physical world, facts grow out of each other. A result becomes the cause of another result, which in its turn will become a cause. The enormity of the burdens supported by the British nation, has rendered exorbitantly expensive all the products of its soil, and of its industry. Each of the articles consumed by the productive classes, each of their movements, if I may say so, being taxed, the produce of their industry has become dearer, while they are not benefited by the increase of price. In each profession, the gains are not sensibly greater, in consequence of the increased price of the articles produced because this increased price goes to the discharge of the additional taxes to be paid by the producer, and thus adds nothing to his profits; and this general enhancement compels the producers, in their capacity of consumers, to impose upon themselves continual privations.

An Englishman who trades with a capital not his own, if he is obliged to pay an interest on that capital, cannot maintain his family. A landed estate, or a capital in the stocks, which every where else would be competent to procure ease, without labour, are not enough in England to enable their owner to live. If he does not employ them directly himself, he must exert some particular art, he must be concerned either as principal or subaltern, in some separate undertaking.

In a word, the Englishman who has it not in his power to exercise some sort of art or industry, he who has a fixed, a moderate revenue, and who is not bound to the soil, travels into countries where living is less expensive; and this is the motive which has driven towards France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy, those swarms of English travellers, in the number of whom, there are indeed a few to be found, actuated by curiosity alone. To this cause is likewise to be traced the great distress of that class of workmen who are engaged in manufactures. A laborer in England, according to the number of persons in his family, and notwithstanding the most praise worthy exertions on his part, cannot earn more than three-fourths, and sometimes not more than one half, of what is necessary to defray his expenses. The parish, that is, the produce of the tax laid for the maintenance of the poor, must supply the deficiency. One third, it is said, of the population of Great Britain, is thus obliged to resort to public charity. Few beggars are to be met with, because the assistance which they receive, is delivered to them in their houses; and this assistance not being of itself sufficient to support them, they are still compelled to work. An honest English traveller, who journeyed lately from one end of France to the other, manifested, at every step, his astonishment that people there could earn a livelihood by their labour. This astonishment indicates clearly, what takes place in Great Britain.

There are, no doubt, likewise, to be met with in England, wealthy proprietors, rich capitalists, who have no business to pursue but their pleasures. Their revenues are so immense, that they exceed all their wants, and set at defiance all diarness. But their number is always inconsiderable, compared with the totality of the nation. The British nation in general, except these spoiled children of Fortune, is wedded to perpetual labour. It can enjoy no rest. There are in England, no idlers by profession. Every man, who is not actively engaged in some pursuit,—every man, who, if I may use the expression, looks around him, is remarked at once. There are not in England, coffee houses, or billiard rooms filled up with loungers from morning till night; and the public walks are deserted every other day but Sunday. On that day they are frequented by every body; but still every body appears there, as it were, wrapped up in speculation about his business. Such of the British as allow themselves the least relaxation in their labours, are soon overtaken by complete ruin; and I was assured in London, that several of those families who had but little beforehand, had fallen into the greatest embarrassments during the stay of the allied sovereigns in London, because these princes strongly excited curiosity, and in order to see them, the people had intermitted their usual occupations, for several days in succession.

Those even who, being in tolerably good circumstances, still continue to labour, although they might do without it; labour in order to become rich, in order to place themselves above the reach of events, and to vie with those richer than themselves, in every kind of extravagance. The greatest reproach in France, is, to be deficient in courage. The severest reproach in England, is, to be deficient in guineas. The opinion is, perhaps, not more reasonable on one side, than on the other.

This economic position has a most deplorable effect on the progress of science; and the philosophical observer may fairly apprehend, that the country of Bacon, Newton, and Locke, is doomed to retrograde rapidly towards barbarism. It seems certain, that people there do not read as much as they formerly did. They have no time for it, and books are too dear. The rich, who may think only of amusement, have other enjoyments than those connected with scientific pursuits; and, in fact, their pleasures disqualify them for the study of the sciences. The best books are seldom read by people of fashion. The reading truly useful, requires an application which is irksome to them; and if perchance, they happen to read a good work, it is as seed which falls on an exhausted soil. The middle class is the only one which studies usefully for society; but before long, it will be impossible even for the middle class, to study in Great Britain.

There are still, however, two sorts of publications which are read, and which indeed are of first necessity, to wit, the Bible and the newspapers. It remains to be ascertained what information is to be derived from either.

I have said, that dearness does not lead necessarily to profit. Often even the producer of an article gains so much less, in proportion as this very article sells high. The increased price diminishes the number of consumers, because it places the goods, beginning with those which may, by any possibility, be dispensed with, out of the reach of certain fortunes. Those who do not altogether give up the article, are more sparing in its use: hence it is in less demand than it was before. The competition of the consumers diminishes, although that of the producers remains the same.

It is thus that the latter, in proportion as they deprive themselves of the articles which they were accustomed to use, feel more imperiously the necessity of selling even at a very moderate profit, the articles which they produce. No where are exertions to attract the attention of purchasers, carried farther, than in England. Hence the studied nicety in the setting off of their shops to the best advantage; the ridiculous ornaments by which attention is challenged. Hence the multiplied advertisements, the goods offered below the usual price, the tone of quackery which strikes a foreigner. The directors of the first theatre in London boast themselves in the most pompous style, of the applause which their performers have received from an enraptured audience; an audience by the by, in a great degree, collected by themselves. In order to inform the public of some new enterprise, or indeed of a simple change of domicile, it is not deemed sufficient to fix a notice at the corner of a wall, but you are met every step in the streets of London, by ambulatory advertisements, displayed like so many banners, in the midst of the busy crowd, and which you can read as you walk along, without losing a minute.

This necessity to sell, creates a sort of struggle between the producers. The question is, who shall sell cheapest. But, as the article is unavoidably expensive, on account of the taxes with which it is saddled, the grower must save on the quality. Thus is it to be seen in England, as every where else, that goods are so much less perfect of their kind, as they are dearer; some qualities which formerly were excellent, have become good for nothing. The woollen stocking manufactory of the British, their work in leather, cutlery, &c. the reputation of which extended all over Europe, are no longer worth what they were. The silks manufactured by them, are but a cobweb, and under the name of wine, the nation which is said to be the richest in the world, is condemned to drink the most dangerous poison.

To the same cause are to be traced the numerous crimes which are committed in Great Britain. There were fifteen thousand persons convicted in 1813. The whole of Europe does not exhibit such a multitude of convicts, and this number increases progressively from year to year as do the taxes, the public debt, &c. What is to be the end of this appalling progression? I put the question.—

This dreadful state of things has been ascribed to the want of religion. There is no country where there is more religion than in England. Methodism, which is the fanaticism of christianity, has made there a progress which every body has noted. It is principally in Catholic countries that incredulity has gained ground. It is time to put an end to absurd declamations not justified by experience, and candidly to confess that the economic situation of a nation, or, if you please, wants considerable in comparison with the means of gratifying them, are the principal cause of this multiplicity of crimes which are a source of affliction for philosophy, not less than for religion.

When we see a nation so active, so noble, so ingenious, compelled in consequence of bad economic system to labour so intensely, and to suffer notwithstanding so many privations; when we see a country abounding in talents, in virtues, yet disgraced by so many crimes, we are apt to ask ourselves with bitterness: of what use then is civil and religious liberty?

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* It is an error to suppose that the depreciation of exchange on London, originated in want of confidence in bank notes, the only currency with which a bill of exchange on England can be paid. Twenty-three francs are now given for one pound sterling, which formerly sold for not more than sixteen francs. Still we all know, in 1816, that the bank of England is now no more able to redeem its notes in specie, than it was in 1813.

During the war, one hundred guineas in gold payable in London, might have been bought with ninety-three guineas in gold on the continent. There was no want of confidence connected with this transaction. The cause was the abundance of depreciated English currency, that is, of the kind of currency payable in London, and not the want of confidence in the notes.

* A milliard of francs is about 600 millions of dollars.