THE HISTORIANS

Henry Pirenne: a European Historian

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A student of Carl Stephenson, the latter once a student of Henri Pirenne, Bryce Lyon has written a life of this celebrated Belgian historian. Lyon's undertaking had the blessing of the *familia* Pirenne, an extended group including a devoted son, Count Jacques Pirenne (now deceased), and François Ganshof, the dean of Belgium's many distinguished historians. Not surprisingly, therefore, praise is lavished on Pirenne, on his "professionalism", objectivity, and productivity. This book is, in fact, an expression of secularized hagiography, quite wonderful, indeed, when one remembers that Pirenne himself had had at least one serious battle against the Bollandists, and won it hands down.

In spite of this booster quality, Mr. Lyon's book is informative about many aspects of this great historian's public life, works, and controversies. Its pages tell us much about Pirenne's personal life, and indeed convey the impression that he was the very embodiment of the Gallic and academic virtues of disarming self-deprecation, restrained pomposity, and much wit and ability in both conversation and writing. This may be unfair to Pirenne because Mr. Lyon has an eye for "success", and sees to it that we know the name of every distinguished academic or functionary his hero met, and the circumstances and nature of all the honors he received. Naturally, one says in exculpation, a book which tries to do everthing and which is, at the same time, a kind of official biography can neither do everything nor indeed anything very thoroughly. One's advice for the future biographer of

* Bryce Lyon, *Henri Pirenne: A Biographical and Intellectual Study*. Ghent, E. Story-Scientia, 1974, XIX, 477.

Pirenne's personal or intellectual life is really rather simple: avoid taking sides in the Flemish and Walloon social and cultural war, and wait until the members of the *familia* Pirenne have all vanished into the grave. In the meantime, it may be useful to examine Pirenne's historical ideologies.

Mr. Lyon reminds us that Pirenne overlaid a basically Gallic liberal tradition of institutional and class history expressed by Augustin Thierry, François Guizot, and the great Fustel de Coulanges with the contemporary formulations of economic theory conveyed to him by German tongues and books. Gustav Schmoller helped to systematize the theoretical background of his ideas, and Pirenne's economic history was constantly reinforced by Carl Lamprecht's historical work. Since both these Germans and our Belgian were obviously in debt to physiocratic and classical economic thought and to such individuals as Ricardo, it is evident that Pirenne's debt to the Germans was not servile. Instead, these Germans reinforced in him his own bent, one altogether in harmony with his social background and the age in which he lived.[1]

Until the First World War, the Gallic or Romanist ideology of this Walloon was in harmony with his debt to German economic and historical thought. Not unreasonably, given Belgium's place, Pirenne thought of himself as one more Belgian bridge between French and German culture. It was only during the war that, partly because the German invaders supported Flemish culture against the dominant Walloons and partly because his German friends played the fool (who did not, however?), Pirenne gave up his mediatory role and responded with a new anti-Germanist thesis. Ro-

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[1] The reader will forgive me for putting this history in the terms of who got what from whom, but this is the etiquette characteristic of the vulgar professionalism of today and I cannot help but be infected by it. Viewed generally, it is obvious that Pirenne had the best of both worlds, French and German, simply because of his Belgian capacity to be in either culture. And this was important because, although the German and French rivalry turned out to be self-destructive, it made their intellectuals into the most inventive historians of the turn of the century, a position they more or less retain today. Closed in their island fastness by their gradual retreat and crouched, as it were, behind Stubbs' worn shield, the English have until recently played dumb in urban history, a role that suits them admirably. Far more open because impeded by few pre-existing intellectual structures, the Americans may have moved up, but their democratic love of selling and packaging has led their initiatives, like misdirected armored attacks, into the bottomless Pripet of professional revisionism and sociological tautology. Ill considered and relegated to the sidelines, as it were, the Italians have perhaps done better. Only they harbored a free spirit such as Nicola Ottokar with his anti-Marxian prosopography and, far better, his *Le città francesi nel medio evo.*

The quotations from Pirenne used below are taken from his essay on the periods of the social history of capitalism and his general economic history (both republished in Henri Pirenne, *Histoire économique de l'Occident médiéval,* ed. Emile Coornaert), his *Belgian Democracies,* and his posthumous work *Mohammed and Charlemagne.* Lestocquoy's observation is to be found in his *Les villes de Flandre et d'Italie,* and the phrase "pre-urban nucleus" derives from Ganshof's *Développement des villes entre Loire et Rhin.*

manists, such as Coulanges, had long since argued that the primitive incapacity of the Germans who invaded the Roman Empire had led to the "reduction", weakening, and eventual collapse of Roman institutions in the Merovingian and Carolingian periods. Pirenne picked up the cudgels anew and transferred his effort from institutional history to economic. "Was", he asked, « the influence of the Germans imposed on Europe by virtue of its inherent vigor or simply by virtue of circumstance »? It happened obviously by virtue of circumstance because of an external factor, the conquest of the Mediterranean by the Muslims. The Carolingian period witnessed no Renaissance, but was merely a "decadence", an age even worse than that of the earlier Merovingians when things, in spite of the Germans — incapable, it appears, even of destruction — still remained essentially Roman.

Put baldly, our Walloon historian seems unsympathetic. It is, moreover, certainly true that, from the days when a late Roman poet contrasted Latin bipeds with German quadrupeds, the usual Romanist statement, as we see in Coulanges, harbours a kind of unnecessary scorn directed against simple or primitive peoples. On the other hand, one must also remember that what both Pirenne and Coulanges were fighting was the ancient conception that liberty had its birthplace in the German forest, that Germans had a natural capacity for government whereas Latins did not, and other fictions. The anodyne form this took in Pirenne's time was Alfons Dopsch's (curiously called a Romanist in Lyon's book) assertion that the Germans and especially the Carolingians not only knew how to continue, but also gave new life and form to, Roman institutions. A little later when a scream of wounded German pride rose like Behemoth from the deeps, Dopsch's otherwise admirable student Erna Patzelt reminded an embarrassed world that the Latin "race" had lost its capacity to assimilate other cultures and govern itself, qualities revived in the West by the « fresh and precious blood of the Germans », whose "spirit", indeed, had saved us all from being "orientalized".[2]

But Pirenne was not only an ideologue of cultural history. Far more important, he was an economic historian of great significance. In this regard, his accent on the primacy of the economic element in human history and motivation, or, to invent a word, his economism, is sometimes almost breathtaking. Who would have thought that the spread of the Near Easterners' mystery cults under the Roman Empire « was merely a consequence of the amplitude of their commerce » or that « lack of money » was the « essential cause » of the Carolingian collapse? Pirenne was usually more subtle than this, however, but certainly believed that a man's economic role determined his status, and, to some degree, his political ideology. « Just as », he says, « agrarian civilization had made of the peasant a man

[2] The quotations from Patzelt derive from her otherwise interesting *Die fränkische Kultur und der Islam.*

whose normal state was servitude, trade made of the merchant a man whose normal condition was liberty ». Again, concerning the medieval townsman, we are told that « personal liberty itself was not claimed as a natural right. It was sought only for the advantages it conferred ».

This economism offended not a few. Contrasting the liberal ideas of Thierry and other early XIXth century ideologues with those of Pirenne, the Abbé Lestocquoy has commented rather sourly: « And so the poetry of liberty forever vanished from the history of the town. Everything is reduced to a struggle by merchants for the right of free trade. The beautiful notion that enchanted the XIXth century was really, it seems, only the right to transport salt and cloth. We thought we could see parade before us the ghosts of the soldiers of Valmy. But we were wrong. These men in uniform were only customs officers ». In fact, the critics of Pirenne went too far. As Mr. Lyon's book tells us, H. Van Houtte deplored the attempt of both Lamprecht and Pirenne to base human ideology on "economic phenomena" by asserting that « their teaching here joins the historical materialism of Karl Marx ». But this is pure polemics. Regardless of the merits of economism's positions, others besides Marx have held them, and Schmoller, to whom Pirenne owed so much, was a firm anti-Marxian.

It is not, I think, Pirenne's economism that is really at fault here, but rather the mixture of liberalism and economism that marked his age and still marks the so-called capitalist democracies of today, not to speak of their enemies. To Pirenne, growth was the greatest economic good and was everywhere accompanied by the expansion of personal liberty. So racinated is this belief today among both Marxists and anti-Marxists that one militates in vain against it. Although evidence from Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and from the eighteenth and nineteenth may be adduced to show a parallel between economic growth and personal liberation, great economic growth was also sometimes accompanied by a marked increase in coercion or servitude, as, for example, in the Roman Republic, early modern European expansion, and in contemporary people's democracies. Where Pirenne departs from the Marxists (and others as well), however, is in his insistence on the proposition that the "power of capital" can work for good only when it is unimpeded by any governmental or collective regulations. It was this specific « power of capital » that, in the middle ages as in modern times, « spread throughout the world a new conception of labor », that, in turn, « stimulated social progress ».

Steeped, as Mr. Lyon says, in « liberal bourgeois philosophy », this son of a little industrialist of Verviers insisted that the town and its entrepreneurs or merchants were the principal generative agents of human advancement. In this regard, indeed, Pirenne's reconstruction of the history of the medieval town often seems to owe as much to the French Revolution (up to and including Le Chapelier, be it understood, but *not* beyond) and to XIXth century liberal myth as it does to the documents he knew so well. The rise

of the town and its entrepreneurial elements restored freedom. During the middle ages, he says, « freedom, of old, used to be the monopoly of a privileged class. By means of the cities it again took its place in society as a natural attribute of the citizen ». Medieval entrepreneurs led a political "reform" movement, « like that which the capitalistic middle class directed after the end of the XVIIIth Century in the political revolution which put an end to the old order of things ». Implicitly, because of the humble origins of Pirenne's ideal medieval merchant, « the history of the town populations of the middle ages begins with democratic government. Strangely, merchants needed « a simpler legal system, more expeditious and more equitable » than did all other groups. Furthermore, because they had to be literate in order to do business, merchants wanted lay education, showing « thereby an initiative which corresponded perfectly to that lay spirit of which they were the pre-eminent representatives in the civilization of the middle ages ».

And there is a hidden miracle in this. Before and after Pirenne's lifetime, it was widely argued that the economic growth of the central middle ages sprang naturally from the « pacification and fecundity of the population » in the post-Carolingian period after the invasions had ceased, and that the « pre-urban nuclei » and the traders attached to them and their lords served as agents for this early growth. This might have been so, says Pirenne, but « it was not the case ». The manorial economy was one of no markets, and its denizens were men of an age « in which the spirit of initiative was probably completely lacking », and who had « no desire for self-improvement ». At that time, there were no « professional merchants » — whatever "professional" may mean — but merely servitors who, in spite of transferring real and capital surpluses from one place to another, were « in no respects merchants ». Coming at a time marked by the « traditional immobility of the patriarchal form of government », « the idea of profit was absolutely foreign » to these domanial traders. And, as the night the day, it also follows that the inhabitants of the « pre-urban nuclei » were governed by their lords and bishops « and no longer asked to have even the least share in government ».

What awakened this slumbering manorial society was « external stimulus ». This stimulus was of two kinds, one external geographically and the other socially. Pirenne gives credit — sometimes a trifle too generously — to the foreign merchants of the Mediterranean and the North Sea/Baltic/Varangian route. More important, the West itself, by a kind of virgin's parturition, gave birth to wanderers of no discernible and therefore humble social origins, and « it is among this crowd of footloose adventurers that the first adepts of trade must, without any doubt, be looked for ». Here are our original « professional merchants », and it is worth noting that they did not live in, but *only* outside, the pre-urban nuclei, and that they, unlike all other contemporary groups, possessed initiative, desired profits, and

esteemed self-improvement. Jews, one may add parenthetically, are hardly mentioned in this context, oddly enough, nor is the European slave trade.

Left to oneself, one would naturally imagine that, once it had been sparked, the great growth of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries would summon all social elements, churchmen, nobles, merchants, artisans, and farmers to participate innovately and generatively. But no, according to Pirenne, Ricardo's Phrygian cap firmly emplanted on his head. All profited from it, of course, but only merchant-entrepreneurs played a progressive role. Italy apart — Italy always has to be "apart" in the northern European imagination — nobles did not live in town, even in the earliest days, but instead clustered on Karl Hegel's mountaintop deep in the fogs of the countryside. Churchmen were more apparent and active in town but, in spite of everything (the word "usury" is hardly mentioned by Pirenne), our historian was convinced that medieval townsmen, « devoted entirely to practical affairs, remained as much strangers to the speculations of the schools as the clergy were to the cares of commerce and manufacture ». Peasants — that wonderfully bourgeois word — were mere beneficiaries, not actors. Before being kicked awake by the merchants, the peasant had been « content to provide for his daily bread, certain of the morrow, and longing for no amelioration of his lot, since he could not conceive of the possibility ». To the power of capital and the medieval « middle class was reserved the mission of spreading the idea of liberty far and wide and of becoming . . . the means of the gradual enfranchisement of the rural classes ». And the early merchants were almost perversely democratic. « If they wished to marry ». Pirenne tells us with a straight face, « the women they chose almost always belonged to the serf class ».

Pirenne has a certain sympathy and even love for workers, just as long as they work, of course, and prize individual entrepreneurial ambitions. He employs harsh words to describe the bourgeois patricians of the later thirteenth century who had forgotten the countinghouse or workship (and presumably female serfs), aped the nobility, invested in land, and built oligarchies, thus depriving self-made men of humble origins of recognition and place. Nevertheless, the so-called « democratic revolutions » of the fourteenth century were not really that. Medieval artisans were « incapable of understanding economic questions . . . or the very nature of wholesale trade and capitalist manufacture » with its necessary layoffs and shifting wage rates. Their movements were therefore those of narrow self-interest best expressed by the restrictive monopolies the various guilds sought to obtain. The general effect of the organization of the guilds and their direct participation in government was, to Pirenne, undoubtedly harmful and weakened or even destroyed the once flourishing commerce and industry of the Low Countries. Facing in his own time the first great age of general strikes, what Pirenne admired was what may be called democratic plutocracy, the world of the self-made man.

As is obvious by now, our good classical economist was clearly hostile to governmental or state intervention in the economy. Anything that interfered with the freedom of the economic individual destroyed social progress. In a wonderful passage, Pirenne constrasts the independent city of the middle ages with the modern or contemporary one, « torpid with the monotony of an existence adequately secured by the state, and requiring no serious effort from its own inhabitants ». His view of the mercantilist or regulatory monarchies and principates of the late middle ages and modern times is similar to that recently expressed by the historian Roberto Lopez: its regulations impede individual initiative and fundamentally help few. Pirenne's heroes are always the same. The medieval economy was resuscitated by adventurous « sons of serfs » desiring commercial profit. « Before the thirteenth century, we find ourserves observing an epoch of free capitalist expansion ». During this happy period, men « newly enriched by commerce » constantly rejuvenated town leadership. And, when capitalism was being reborn again later on, « the new men of the Renaissance were in fact adventurers », adventurers without ancestry, embodying once again a new « growth of the spirit of enterprise ».

Churchmen, nobles, artisans, and farmers, then, did not advance progress except passively. Merchant-entrepreneurs did that, and they did it by « the vigor of their arms, force of their wills, and *clarté de leur intelligence* ». The fundamental basis of capitalism, the efficient cause of the formation of the bourgeoisie, "*c'est l'intelligence*". And when it is recalled that, to Pirenne, the animating spirit of capitalism and the motive of the heroic adventurer was the « love of gain, quite as natural to primitive man as to civilized », it may be perceived that we have here a magnificent proposition: the love of gain, *c'est l'intelligence*.

When schematized in this way, Pirenne's analysis appears mildly absurd, but it is worth noting that, although he should perhaps not have unduly praised men for seeking to profit from their commerce with their brethren, his perpetual reductionism has one great advantage. When defining capitalism, Pirenne sought an essence that could be used to describe human or historical reality without regard to the particular etiquette or forms of specific ages. To historians who, like Max Weber, tried to restrict the use of the word "capitalism" to a specific period, Pirenne's use of the term to describe the twelfth and early thirteenth century economy was altogether anathema. But Pirenne really knew the documents he read in such quantities, and they clearly show that, regardless of the localized structure of medieval political organization, the town economy of that time was one in which institutional and collective restraints on the economic individual were at a minimum. Pirenne called this lack of more than minimal restraints "capitalism". And why not? The word the *ism* derives from is *caput* which, in medieval usage, often meant "capital" or money invested. All the great Belgian added was a doctrine asserting that virtue necessarily and always

inheres in the economic individual and the entrepreneurial function, a doctrine no more religious than the Marxist's cult of the worker or the democrat's of the people. We can dispense with the entrepreneurial religion, and, admiring its clarity and simplicity, agree with the rest of Pirenne's teaching on capitalism.

Pirenne, then, was a man of his time and, indeed, his own objectivity was often crippled by his passionate participation in the causes of his age. Even if he failed in some part to attain his own ideal, he was nevertheless a magnificent historian. Of all of them, he was perhaps the most important founder and initial systematizer of urban history. And there is something else. "God", growled one of our German émigré art historians at his unformed and recalcitrant students, « is in the details ». To read Pirenne's handling of texts and documents is to see his divine spark.