

1974-02-03b: [LIFE CHANCES] Previous International Congresses on my Topic.

A thought that I might check the proceedings of earlier International Congresses to see if anything approaching the kind of thing I'm doing is to be found--i.e., any emphasis upon hereditary principle. If not, as presumably is the case, I then defend it in terms of "petering out", and opine what significance it might have about showing a dimension of the development of western society that has been neglected.

Why the question of the decline of hereditary right has not achieved great conscious significance in historiography may be due to the fact that it has not actually disappeared in principle. It has been excluded from operation in the political sphere, and no one doubts in the least the desirability of that--except beleaguered royalists here and there. It has been frontally attacked on the economic basis, in the form of taxing inherited wealth, from time to time in different western countries (I shall speak later of how this operates in communist countries) but the history of inheritance taxation in the non-communist world is chiefly one of ways to escape its effects. Ultimately, the question of hereditary right touches upon the family itself, and there the principle remains almost unquestioned in terms at least of the moral values that are transmitted from one generation to another within the family.

In these conditions, any attack upon hereditary right might seem ultimately to be an attack upon the family. For, if one were to present the issue of hereditary right as one of a steady constriction of function during the development of modern society, then there would be implied finally the elimination of the family in the traditional sense--conjuring up the ogres of state control of raising children, for example. Yet there are ways of defining the question of hereditary right which make some forms of it clearly obsolescent and other forms of it very vital to the continuance of society as we know it. The simplest definition of the question to achieve this effect is to allow that all family influence is valid and necessary during the youth of the individual, but not so after he reaches his majority. That is to say, the family deals with children, but cannot have any significant material influence upon the child when it reaches majority and so becomes an autonomous individual in society. All family advantage and privilege would thus be limited to the pre-mature years of the offspring, perhaps including the support of his education beyond it. In this way the psychological aspects of parenthood would be preserved, perhaps even enhanced in that all the family's help for the children would be limited to the formative years. The denial of the right of transmitting great wealth would thus not per se destroy the family. IT IS already of virtually no significance as far as the vast majority of people is concerned, and if it does not serve any great functional need of society for the tiny percentage who do pass great wealth to their progeny, then there is no more reason that such transmission of wealth by inheritance should survive than the transmission of political office by the tiny percentage of society that did so, was allowed to survive after the 18th century.

The polar elements of the principle of hereditary right, therefore, are the needs of society at large that are served by having family privilege operate over generations, as opposed to the ability of the individual who reaches his majority to make his way in the world himself. The latter is surely the ideal of the open society, the former a kind of necessary limitation of that ideal if the ends of society at large are better served by hereditary transmission of one kind of power or another rather than not.