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The interpretation of
history

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THE INTERPRETATION OF
HISTORY

J. T. SHOTWELL

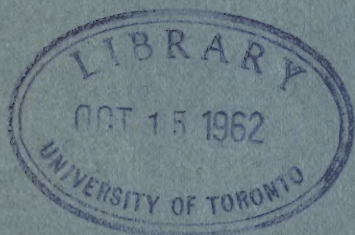
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THE INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

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Two great questions front all students of the social sciences: What happened? Why? History attempts to deal mainly with the first. It gathers the scattered traces of events and fills the archives of civilization with their records. Its science sifts the evidence and prepares the story. Its art recreates the image of what has been, and "old, forgotten far-off things" become once more the heritage of the present. Though no magic touch can wholly restore the dead past, history satisfies in considerable part the curiosity which asks "What happened?" But "Why?" What forces have been at work to move the latent energies of nations, to set going the march of events? What makes our revolutions or our tory reactions? Why did Rome fall, Christianity triumph, feudalism arise, the Inquisition flourish, monarchy become absolute and of divine right, Spain decline, England emerge, democracy awaken and grow potent? Why did these things happen when or where they did? Was it the direct intervention of an overruling Providence, for whose purposes the largest battalions were always on the move? Or are the ways past finding out? Do the events themselves reveal a meaning?

These are not simply questions for philosophers. Children insist upon them most. He is a lucky story-teller, whose Jack-the-Giant-Killer or Robin Hood is not cut through, time and again, by the unsatisfied curiosity as to *why* the beanstalk grew so high, *why* Jack wanted to climb, *why* Robin Hood lived under a greenwood tree, etc. Many a parental Herodotus has been wrecked on just such grounds. The problem for the philosopher or scientist is just the same as that brought forward by the child. The drama of history unrolls before our eyes in more sober form; our Robin Hoods become Garibaldis, our Jack-the-Giant-Killer a Napoleon, but we still have to ask how fortune and genius so combined to place southern Italy in the hands of the one, Europe at the feet of the other. Not only is the problem the same, but we answer it in the same way. Here, at once, we have a clue to the nature of interpretation. For anyone knows that you answer the child's "Why?" by telling another story. Each story is, in short, an explanation, and each explanation a story. The school-boy's excuse for being late is that he couldn't find his cap. He couldn't find his cap *because* he was playing in the barn. Each incident was a cause and each cause an incident in his biography. In like manner most of the reasons we assign for our acts merely state

an event or a condition of affairs which is in itself a further page of history. At last, however, there comes a point where the philosopher and the child part company. History is more than events. It is the manifestation of life, and behind each event is some effort of mind and will, while within each circumstance exists some power to stimulate or obstruct. Hence psychology and economics are called upon to explain the events themselves. The child is satisfied if you account for the career of Napoleon by a word "genius", but that merely opens the problem to the psychologist. The child in us all attributes the overthrow to the hollow squares of Waterloo, but the economist reminds us of the Continental system and the Industrial Revolution which made Waterloo possible.

The process of interpreting history, therefore, involves getting as much as possible out of history, psychology, and economics—using economics in the widest possible sense as the affective material background of life. This does not get to final causes, to be sure. It leaves the universe still a riddle. Theologians and metaphysicians are the only ones who attempt to deal with final causes as with final ends. Certainly historians cannot follow them in such speculations. The infinite lies outside experience, and experience is the sphere of history. When we talk of the interpretation of history, therefore, we do not mean its setting in the universe, but a knowledge of its own inner relationships. We confine ourselves to humanity and the theatre of its activities. But within this realm of mystery man exists, acts, and thinks—or thinks he does—which is all the same for historians; and these thoughts and deeds remain mostly understood, even by the actors themselves. Here is mystery enough, but mystery which is not in itself unknowable but merely unknown. The social sciences do not invade the field of religion; they have nothing to do with the ultimate; their problems are those of the City of Man, not of the City of God. So the interpretation of history can leave theology aside, except where theology attempts to become historical. Then it must face the same criticism as all other histories. If the City of God is conceived of as a creation of the processes of civilization, it becomes as much a theme for scientific analysis as the Roman Empire or the Balkan Confederacy. If theology substitutes itself for science it must expect the same treatment as science. But our search for historic "causes" is merely a search for other things of the same kind—natural phenomena of some sort—which lie in direct and apparently inevitable connection. We interpret history by knowing more of it, bringing to bear our psychology and every other auxiliary to open up each intricate relationship between men, situations, and events.

This is our first great principle. What do we mean by the "meaning" of anything but more knowledge of it? In physics or chemistry we enlarge our ideas of phenomena by observing how they work, what are their affinities, how they combine or react. But all these properties are merely different sides of the same thing, and our knowledge of it is the sum total of our analysis. Its meaning has changed, as our knowledge enlarges, from a lump of dirt to a compound of elements. No one asks what an element is, because no one can tell—except in terms of other elements. The interpretation, therefore, of physical phenomena is a description of them in terms of their own properties. The same thing is true of history, only instead of description we have narrative. For history differs from the natural sciences in this fundamental fact, that while they consider phenomena from the standpoint of Space, history deals with them from the standpoint of Time. Its data are in eternal change, moving in endless succession. Time has no static relationships, not so much as for a second. One moment merges into the next, and another has begun before the last is ended. The old Greeks already pointed out that one could never put his foot twice into the same waters of a running stream, and never has philosophy insisted more eloquently upon this fluid nature of Time than in the writings of Professor Bergson. But whatever Time may be in the last analysis it is clear that whereas physics states the meaning of the phenomena with which it deals in descriptions, history must phrase its interpretations in narrative—the narrative which runs with passing time.

Hence history and its interpretation are essentially one, if we mean by history all that has happened, including mind and matter in so far as they relate to action. Any other kind of interpretation is unscientific. It eludes analysis because it does not itself analyze, and hence it eludes proof. So theological dogma, which may or may not be true, and speculation in metaphysics are alike outside our problem. Indeed, when we come down to it, there is little difference between "What has happened?" and "Why?" The "Why?" only opens up another "What?" Take for example a problem in present history: "Why has the price of living gone up?" The same question might be asked another way: "What has happened to raise prices?" The change in the form of sentence does not solve anything, for who knows what has happened? But it puts us upon a more definite track toward our solution. We test history by history.

Now the earliest historical narrative is the myth. It is at the same time an explanation. It is no mere product of imagination, of the play of art with the wayward fancies of childlike men. Myths, real genuine myths—not Homeric epics composed for sophisticated,

critical audiences—are statements of “facts” to the believer. They are social outputs, built up out of experience and fitted to new experiences. The long canoes are swept to sea by the northeast hurricane, and year by year in the winter nights at the camp-fires of those who go by long canoes the story is repeated, over and over again, until the sea is left behind or a new race brings triremes with machinery in the inside. So long as the old society exists under the old conditions the myth perpetuates itself; but it also gathers into it the reflex of the changing history. It therefore embodies the belief of the tribe, and this gives it an authority beyond the reach of any primitive higher criticism. Appealed to as the “wisdom of our fathers”, as the universally accepted and therefore true—*quod semper quod ab omnibus*—it becomes a sort of creed for its people. More than a creed, it is as unquestioned as the world around and life itself. The eagle of Prometheus or of the Zuñi myths is as much a part of the world to Greeks and Zuñis as the eagle seen yonder on the desert-rim. The whole force of society is on the side of myth. The unbeliever is ostracized or put to death. What would have happened to the man who should have dared to question the literal narrative of Genesis in the thirteenth century, has happened in some form in every society. The Inquisition, we are told, was merely a refinement of lynch law. In any case it would never have been effective without popular support. The heretics of all ages suffer because the faith they challenge is the treasured possession of their society, a heritage in which resides the mysterious efficacy of immemorial things.

Now it is a strange fact that most of our beliefs begin in prior belief. It does not sound logical, but it remains true that we get to believing a thing from believing it. Belief is the basic element in thought. It starts with consciousness itself. Once started, there develops a tendency—“a will”—to keep on. Indeed it is almost the strongest tendency in the social mind. Only long scientific training can keep an individual alert with doubt, or, in other words, keep him from merging his own beliefs in those of his fellows. This is the reason myth has so long played so momentous a rôle in the history of the human intelligence—by far the largest of any one element in our whole history. Science was born but yesterday. Myths are millenniums old. And they are as young to-day as in the glacial period. Heroes and victims share the stage of the drama of history with those uncanny Powers that mock at effort or exalt the weak, and trick with sudden turns the stately progress of society. Whenever the marvellous event is explained by causes more marvellous still, where the belief is heightened by basing it upon deeper

mysteries, we are following the world-old method of explaining by the inexplicable.

Now myths are unsatisfactory as explanations for various reasons, but the main one is that human events are subordinated to the supernatural in which they are set. This means that normal events of daily life are generally passed unnoticed, and attention is concentrated upon the unusual and abnormal. It is in these that the divine or diabolic intervenes. They are pre-eminently—as we still say of railway accidents—acts of God. So the myth neither tells a full story, with all the human data involved, nor directs to any natural sequence of events. Sickness and consequent catastrophe are not attributed to malarial mosquitoes—such as filled the temples of Aesculapius with suppliants and depleted Greece of citizens. All misfortune is due to broken taboos. When Roman armies are defeated the question is “Who has sinned and how?” When death comes to the Australian bushman, there is always black magic to account for it. And pontiffs and medicine men elaborate the mythology which explains and justifies the taboos.

That is not to say that myths are the creations of priests. The creation is the work of the society itself. The priest merely elaborates. The initial belief resides in the nerves of primitive men, the fear of the uncanny, the vague apprehension which still chills us in the presence of calamity. Social suggestion is responsible for much of it—we tremble when we see the rigid fear on the faces of those beside us. When someone whispers in the dark, “Isn’t it awful?” “It” suddenly thrills into being, like a ghost. Voltaire was wrong to attribute the origin of these beliefs of superstition to priestcraft. The priest merely took hold of the universal beliefs of his people and gave them form and consistency, as the minstrel wove them into poetry. The scruple about entering the dark wooded slopes beyond the village grain-fields is enough to people it, for most of us, with all uncanny things. If you are the kind of person to have scruples about entering a wood by night, you are the kind to appreciate the possibilities of lurking danger in its shadows and moving presences in its thickets. So on a night, when the moon is high and the wind is still, you may hear the hounds and the wolf-packs of the wild hunters—of Diana and Mars. It needs no priestly college to convince us of that. The wood and the wolves and our own nerves are enough. But the priestly college develops the things of night into the stuff for history; and centuries after the howling wolves have disappeared from the marshes around Rome the city cherishes, to the close of its history, the myth of its founding.

Men first tell stories. Then they think about them. So from mythology, the ancients proceeded to philosophy. Now philosophy is a wide word. For some of us it means keen criticism of fundamental things. For others it is a befuddled consideration of unrealities. But whatever it may be now, philosophy came into the antique world as science, critical analysis, and history was but another name for it. The "inquiry" of those Ionian logographi who began to question Homer, in the sixth century before Christ, was a challenge and interpretation of myth. So, all through its history, history has demanded of its students denial rather than acceptance, scepticism rather than belief, in order that the story of men and empires be more than a myth. But the tendency to believe and accept is so strongly impressed upon us from immemorial social pressures that few have risen to the height of independent judgment which was the Greek ideal. Criticism, in the full sense of the word, is an interpretation. To reject a story means that one constructs another in its place. It establishes that certain things did not happen because certain other ones did. So the Greeks corrected myths, and in doing this made history more rational. Man came into the story more and the gods receded.

One may distinguish two phases of philosophic interpretation of history, that in which the philosophy is in reality a theology and that in which it is natural science. In the first phase we are still close to myth. Myth places the cause of events in Mystery of some sort—deities, demons, the Fates, or Fortune. Early philosophy proceeds upon these assumptions, which also penetrate most antique histories. Even Polybius, hard-headed, much-experienced man of the world, cannot quite attribute to natural causes the rise of Rome. Fortune, that wayward goddess of Caesar, had something to do with it—how much it would be hard to say. Livy had this myth-philosophy to the full; every disaster had its portent, every triumph its omen. This was the practical philosophy of all but the few calm thinkers whose scepticism passed into the second phase, which reached all the way from an open question whether or not the gods interfered in human affairs to the positive denial of their influence. The great source-book for such interpretations of history is Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, where one may find in the guise of a theological discussion a résumé of the various pagan philosophies of history. For the philosophies of history were more frankly philosophy than history; the question at issue was the intruding mystery rather than the circumstances of the intrusion, and one denied or affirmed mainly on *à priori* grounds. The denial was not historical criticism and the philosophy of doubt hardly more genuine historical interpretation

than the philosophy of belief. Its conclusions more nearly *coincide* with the demands of scientific research; that is all. But mythology was not lightly to be got rid of, even among philosophers, and as for the populace, it merely exchanged one myth for another, until finally it could take refuge in theology. The bold infidelity of a Lucretius was too modern for the age which was to give birth to Christianity, and the Voltaires of antiquity were submerged in a rising sea of faith.

Moreover there were two reasons why antique philosophy could not accomplish much. It lacked the instruments by which to penetrate into the two centres of its problem: psychology, to analyze the mind, and experimental laboratories, to analyze the setting of life or life itself. It had some knowledge of psychology, to be sure, and some experimental science, but relatively little; and it never realized the necessity for developing them. It sharpened the reason to an almost uncanny degree, and played, like a grown athlete, with ideas. But it followed the ideas into their ideal world and left this world unaccounted for. Above all, it knew practically nothing of economic and material elements in history. Even a Thucydides has no glimpse of the intimate connection between the forces of economics and of politics. History for him is made by *men*, not by grain-fields and metals. It was not until the nineteenth century—just the other day—that economic factors in historical causation were emphasized as playing a rôle comparable to that of man himself. Thucydides did not realize how commercial and industrial competition could rouse the rivals of Athens to seek her overthrow. Polybius felt that Fortune was a weak excuse to offer for Rome's 'miraculous rise and fell back upon the peculiar excellence of her constitution. Both were rationalists of a high order, but they never extended their history—and therefore their interpretation—beyond politics. The gods tend to disappear, and mankind to take their place. But it is an incomplete mankind, rational beings moved by ideas and principles; not economic animals moved by blind wants and fettered by the basest limitations. In short, a political man is the farthest analysis one gets. But even Aristotle never knew how many things there were in politics besides politics. The extent of the interplay of material forces upon psychological lay outside his ken.

Upon the whole, then, there is almost nothing to learn from antique interpretations of history. They interest us because of their antiquity and their drift from the supernatural to the natural. But they did not achieve a method which would open up the natural and let us see its working. They are of no service to us in our own interpretations.

Christianity dropped all this rationalist tone of the Greeks, and turned the keen edge of Greek philosophy to hew a structure so vast in design, so simple in outline, that the whole world could understand and none escape. History was but the realization of religion—not of various religions, but of one; the working out of one divine plan. It was a vast, supernatural process, more God's than man's. It was no longer a play of rival forces, the gods of Rome against those of Veii or the Baalim against Jahve. But from all eternity the drama had been determined by the Wisdom that was infinite, and it was being wrought out by an almighty arm. Baal and Jupiter are creatures and puppets, like mere men. History has only one interpretation. Rome—city and empire—is the spoil of the barbarian, the antique world is going to pieces, all its long heritage of culture, its millenniums of progress, its arts and sciences are perishing in the vast, barbaric anarchy: why? There is one answer, sufficient, final—God wills it. No uncertain guesses as to the virtue of peoples, weights of battalions, resources of countries, pressures of populations, wasteful administrations, black deaths, impoverished provinces. There is sin to be punished. The pagan temples of the ancient world, with their glories of art shining on every acropolis, are blasphemy and invite destruction. Philosophers and poets whose inspiration had once seemed divine now seem diabolic. Those who catch the vision of the new faith, shake off the old world as one shakes off a dream. Talk of revolutions! No doctrines of the rights of man have caught the imagination with such terrific force as these doctrines of the rights of God, which from Paul to Augustine were clothed with all the convincing logic of Hellenic genius and Roman realism. It is hard for us Christians to realize the amount of religion which Christianity injected into the world; not merely among the credulous populace, on the religious *qui vive*, but among thinking men. It saturated philosophy with dogma and turned speculation from nature to the supernatural.

The earliest Christians cherished above all other convictions that of the speedy end of the world and lived under the very shadow of the day of doom. As time went on, this millennial hope seemed to grow fainter; but in reality it merely took a more rigid form. It became the structural heart of the new theology. The pageant of history, which had seemed so gloriously wonderful, so inspiring to a Polybius back in the old heroic days, was now a worn and sorry thing. It had no glory nor even any meaning except in the light of the new dispensation. On the other hand the new *patria*, the *Civitas Dei*, transcending all earthly splendor, was absorbing, not merely the present and the future, but the past as well. For all the

tragic lines of war and suffering were now converging. All the aimless struggling was now to show its hidden purpose. In Christianity, the story of nations, of politics, economics, art, war, law—in short of civilization—culminated, and ceased!

Such was the thought which underlay all Christian apologetic theology from the first. But it received its classic statement in the *City of God* by Augustine, written when the city of Rome had fallen, and—if it were not for the heretics and the barbarians—the claims of theology seemed almost realizable. For a thousand years and more it was the unquestioned interpretation of the meaning of history, easily adaptable to any circumstance because it covered all. It still is found wherever pure theology satisfies historical curiosity. That includes—or has included—not merely theologians but most other people, for however slight has been the interest in theology it has been greater than the interest in scientific history, at least until recent times. Religion has supplied the framework of our thought, and the picture of our evolution. The real historians of Europe have been the parish priests. In every hamlet, however remote, for the lowly as for those of high degree, they have repeated the story week after week, century after century. Greek *historikoi* and medieval minstrels, even the modern novels, can hardly match their influence upon the mind of the mass of men. Their tale itself was an unrivalled epic, dark with the supreme central tragedy upon which Christendom itself rested, rising to the keenest voicing of the hopes of life. Its very element was miracle. No fairy story could rival its devious turns, while at the same time the theme swept over the whole path of history—so far as they knew or cared. It was the story of a chosen people, of divine governance from creation to the founding of their own church, guarded in a sacred book and interpreted from a sacred tongue.

Slowly, however, the setting of the Church had changed. The vision of the day of judgment died away almost altogether. Men who dared to dream apocalypses—like Joachim of Flora—or their followers were judged heretics by a church which had planted itself *in seculo* and surrounded itself with all the pomp and circumstances of temporal power. There was still a lingering echo of the older faith, heard most often in the solemn service for the dead. So long as the universe was ptolemaic—the world of Dante and of Milton—the heavy chord of *dies irae* would cut in upon the growing interest in the world itself. But once the crystalline sphere was shattered by Copernicus and Galileo, and the infinite spaces were strewn with stars like our own, the old idea of a world to “shrivel like a parched scroll” had to be revised and readjusted, and with it the simple

conception of the divine purpose, centred upon the centre of things, and working by direct intervention through constant miracle. There was no sudden revolution, the old ideas were too firmly fixed for that. Moreover, science began to challenge the theological history of the universe before it challenged the theological history of man himself. But when geology began to bring in evidence of the age of our residence, and physics achieved the incredible feat of weighing the forces and determining the conditions which held the worlds together, then the details of the scheme of Augustine had to be recast as well. From Augustine to Bossuet one may trace an almost unbroken line of theological interpretations. But some, at least, of the generation which listened to Bossuet were also to watch Bolingbroke and Voltaire whetting the weapons of rationalist attack.

Now what is the weakness of the theological interpretation of history? It is of the same character as that we have seen in the myth. The interpretation is outside of history altogether. Grant all that theology claims, that Rome fell and England arose, that America was discovered, or was so long undiscovered, because "God wills it". That does not enlarge our knowledge of the process. It satisfies only those who believe in absolutely unqualified Calvinism—and they are becoming few and far between. If man is a free agent, even to a limited degree, he can find the meaning of his history in the history itself—the only meaning which is of any value as a guide to conduct or as throwing light upon his actions. Intelligent inquiry has free scope within a universe of ever widening boundaries, where nature, and not supernature, presents its sober phenomena for patient study.

This patient study, however, had not yet been done when the eighteenth-century deists attacked the theological scheme, and their philosophy shares to some extent the weakness of the antique, in its ignorance of data. Natural law took the place of an intervening Providence; history was a process worked out by the forces of nature moving uniformly, restless but continuous, unchecked, inevitable. The process comprised all mankind; no chosen people, implying injustice to those not chosen; no miracles disturbing the regularity of nature. This was an advance toward future understanding because it concentrated attention upon nature and the method of evolution, but in itself it cast but little light upon the problem. For it did not explain details. One sees its failure most where it risked hypotheses with most assurance, in its treatment of religion. It would not do for philosophers to admit that religion—at least of the old, historic type—was itself one of the laws of nature, implanted in humanity from the beginning. Consequently it was for

them a creation of priestcraft. No dismissal of its claims could be more emphatic. Yet the old theologies have since proved that they have at least as many natural rights in society as the criticism of them, and now, with our new knowledge of primitive life, dominated by religion as we see it to be, we cast aside the rationalist conception as a distortion of history almost as misleading as those of the mythology it tried to dispose of.

But the work of Voltaire and his school, in disrupting the old authority of Church and Bible—bitterly denounced and blackly maligned as it has been—is now recognized by all thinking minds, at least by all leaders of thought, to have been an essential service in the emancipation of the human intellect. The old sense of authority could never afterwards, as before, block the free path of inquiry; and the era of Enlightenment, as it was fondly termed, did enlighten the path which history was to take if it was to know itself. The anti-clerical bias of Hume and Gibbon is perhaps all the casual reader perceives in them. But where among all previous historians does one find the attitude so genuinely historical? Moreover, in Hume we have the foundations of psychology, and a criticism of causality which was of the first importance. It would be tempting to linger over these pioneers of the scientific spirit, who saw but could not realize the possibilities of naturalism. Their own achievement, however, was so faulty in just this matter of interpretation, that it was not difficult for the reaction of the early nineteenth century to poke holes in their theories, and so discredit—for the time being—their entire outlook.

Before Voltaire had learned in England the main lines of his philosophy, a Scottish boy had been born in Königsberg, in Prussia, who was destined to exercise as high if not as extended a sovereignty over the intellect of the nineteenth century. Immanuel Kant, however, was of a different type. He fought no ringing fights with the old order. He simply created a new realm in metaphysics, where one could take refuge and have the world as his own. The *idea* dominates. Space and time, the *à priori* forms of all phenomena, lie within us. Mathematics are vindicated because the mind can really master relationships, and the reason emerges from its critique to grapple with the final problem of metaphysics. This at first sight has little to do with interpreting history, but it proved to have a great deal to do with it. The dominance of ideas became a fundamental doctrine among those who speculated concerning causation in history, and metaphysics all but replaced theology as an interpreter.

One sees this already in the work of the greatest historian of the nineteenth century, Leopold von Ranke. To him each age and

country is explicable only if one approaches it from the standpoint of its own *Zeitgeist*. But the spirit of a time is more than the temporal environment in which events are set. It is a determining factor, clothed with the creative potency of mind. Ranke did not develop this philosophic background of history, he accepted it and worked from rather than towards it. His *Zeitgeist* was a thing for historians to portray, not to speculate about. History should concern itself with the preservation of phenomena as they had actually existed in their own time and place. It should recover the lost data of the past, not as detached specimens such as the antiquary places in his museum, but transplanted like living organisms for the preservation of the life as well as of the organs. Now, where else should one look for the vital forces of history than in the mind of the actors? So if the historic imagination can restore events, not simply as they seem to us but as they seemed to those who watched them taking place, we shall understand them in so far as history can contribute to their understanding. In any case this is the field of the historian. If he injects his own theories into the operation he merely falsifies what he has already got. Let the past stand forth once more, interpreted by itself, and we have the truth—incomplete to be sure, but as perfect as we shall ever be able to attain. For, note the point, in that past, the dominating thing was the *Zeitgeist* itself—a thing at once to be worked out and working out, a programme and a creative force. Why, therefore, should one turn aside to other devices to explain history, since it explained itself if once presented in its own light?

Ranke developed no further the implications of his theory than to ensure a reproduction of a living past, as perfect as with the sources at his disposal and the political instincts of his time it was possible to secure. But this high combination of science and art had its counterpart in the philosophy of Hegel. At first sight nothing could be more absurd than the comparison of these two men, the one concrete, definite, searching for minute details, maintaining his own objectivity by insisting upon the subjectivity of the materials he handles, the other theoretic, unhistorical, creating worlds from his inner consciousness, presenting as a scheme of historical interpretation a programme of ideals, unattained and for all we know unattainable. It would be difficult to imagine a philosophy of history more unhistorical than this of Hegel. Yet he but emphasized the Idea which Ranke implicitly accepted.

Hegel was a sort of philosophic Augustine, tracing through history the development of the realm of the spirit. The City of God is still the central theme, but the crude expectations of a miraculous

advent are replaced by the conception of a slow realization of its spiritual power, rising through successive stages of civilization. So he traces, in broad philosophic outlines, the history of this revelation of the Spirit, from its dawn in the Orient, through its developing childhood in Asia, its Egyptian period of awakening, its liberation in Greece, its maturity in the Roman balance of the individual and the State, until finally Christianity, especially in the German world, carries the spirit life to its highest expression. In this process the Absolute reveals itself—that Absolute which had mocked the deists with its isolation and unconcern. And it reveals itself in the Idea which Kantian critique had placed in the forefront of reality and endowed with the creative force of an *élan vital*. So theology, scepticism, and metaphysics combined to explain the world and its history—as the working out of an ideal scheme.

Now as a series of successive ideals the Hegelian scheme may offer some suggestions to those who wish to characterize the complex phenomena of an age or an empire in a single phrase. But it is no statement of any actual process. The ideals which it presents remain ideals, not realities. History written to fit the Hegelian metaphysics would be almost as vigorous a distortion as that which Orosius wrote to fit Augustinian theology. The history of practical Christianity, for instance, is a vastly different thing from the history of its ideals. It is an open question whether the ideal could ever be deduced from the practice, and not less questionable whether we are any nearer realization than at the start. There has been little evidence in outward signs of any such determinant change in the nature of politics or in the stern enforcement of economic laws during the history of western Europe. We find ourselves repeating in many ways experience of Rome and Greece—pagan experiences. Society is only partly religious and only slightly self-conscious. How, then, can it be merely the manifestation of a religious ideal? Surely other forces than ideals or ideas must be at work. The weakness of Hegel's interpretation of history is the history. He interprets it without knowing what it is. His interest was in the other side of his scheme, the Absolute which was revealing itself therein. The scheme, indeed, was a sort of afterthought. But before historians directed any sufficient criticism against his unhistoricity, scepticism in philosophy had already attacked his Absolute. It was the materialistic Feuerbach, with his thoroughgoing avowal that man is the creature of his appetite and not of his mind (*Der Mensch ist was er isst*), who furnished the transition to a new and absolutely radical line of historical interpretation—the materialistic and the economic.

Materialism has a bad name. It has partly earned it, partly had

it thrust upon it. But whatever one may think of its cruder dogmatic aspects, the fact remains that interpretation of history owes at least as much to it as to all the speculations which had preceded it. For it supplied one-half the data—the material half! Neither theology nor metaphysics had really ever got down to earth. They had proceeded upon the theory that the determination of history is from *above* and from *within* mankind, and had been so absorbed with working out their scheme from these premises that the possibility of determination from *around* did not occur to them, until the physical and biological sciences and the new problems of economics pressed it upon their attention. To the old philosophies, this world was at best a theatre for divine or psychic forces; it contributed no part of the drama but the setting. Now came the claim that the environment itself entered into the play and that it even determined the character of the production. It was a claim based upon a study of the details from a new standpoint, that of the commonplace, of business, and of the affairs of daily life. The farmer's work depends upon his soil, the miner's upon the pumps which open up the lower levels. Cities grow where the forces of production concentrate, by harbors or coal-fields. A study of plains, river valleys, or mountain ranges tends to show that societies match their environment; therefore the environment moulds them to itself. So the nature of the struggle for existence, out of which emerges intelligence, is determined by the material conditions under which it is waged.

This is innocent enough. One might have expected that philosophers would have welcomed the emphasis which the new thinkers placed upon the missing half of their speculations. For there was no getting around the fact that the influences of environment upon society had been largely or altogether ignored before the scientific era forced the world upon our view. But no. The dogmatic habits had got too firmly fixed. If one granted that the material environment might determine the character of the drama of history, why should it not determine whether there should be any drama at all or not? There were extremists on both sides, and it was battle royal—Realism and Nominalism over again. One was to be either a Hegelian, booted and spurred, sworn, cavalier-like, to the defense of the divine right of the Idea, or a regicide materialist with a Calvinistic creed of irreligion! The total result was that their mutual opinion of one another brought *both* into ill repute. Philosophies of history became at least as discredited as the materialism they attacked.

Now the materialistic interpretation of history does not necessa-

rily imply that there is nothing but materialism in the process, any more than theology implies that there is nothing but spirit. It will be news to some that such was the point of view of the most famous advocate of the materialistic interpretation of history, H. T. Buckle. His *History of Civilization in England*, published in 1857, was the first attempt to work out the influences of the material world upon the formation of societies. Everyone has heard of how he developed, through a wealth of illustration, the supreme importance of food, soil, and the general aspect of nature. But few apparently have actually read what he says, or they would find that he assigns to these three factors an ever lessening function as civilization advances, that he postulates mind as much as matter, and, with almost Hegelian vision, indicates its ultimate control. He distinctly states that "the advance of European civilization is characterized by a diminishing influence of physical laws and an increasing influence of mental laws", and that "the measure of civilization is the triumph of mind over matter". If Buckle had presented his scheme politely, right side up, as it were, it could hardly have had a sermon preached at it! But he prefaced it with his opinion of theologians and historians—and few, apparently, have ever got beyond the preface. For it was not encouraging reading for historians—a class of men who, in his opinion, are so marked out by "indolence of thought" or "natural incapacity" that they are fit for nothing better than writing monkish annals. There was, of course, a storm of aggrieved protest. But now that the controversy has cleared away, we can see that, in spite of his too confident formulation of his laws, the work of Buckle remains as that of a worthy pioneer in a great, unworked field of science.

Ten years before Buckle published his *History of Civilization*, Karl Marx had already formulated the "economic theory of history". Accepting with reservations Feuerbach's materialistic attack upon Hegel, Marx was led to the conclusion that the motive causes of history are to be found in the conditions of material existence. Already in 1845 he wrote, of the young-Hegelians, that to separate history from natural science and industry was like separating the soul from the body, and "finding the birthplace of history, not in the gross material production on earth, but in the misty cloud formation of heaven."¹ In his *Misère de la Philosophie* (1847) he lays down the principle that social relationships largely depend upon modes of production, and therefore the principles, ideas, categories, which are thus evolved are no more eternal than the relations they express, but are historical and transitory products. From these grounds,

¹ *Die Heilige Familie*, p. 238.

Marx went on to socialism, which bases its militant philosophy upon this interpretation of history. But the truth or falseness of socialism does not affect the theory of history. In the famous manifesto of the Communist party (1848) the theory was applied to show how the Commercial and Industrial Revolutions, with the attendant growth of capital, had replaced feudal by modern conditions. This, like all history written to fit a theory, is bad history, although much nearer reality than Hegel ever got, because it dealt more with actualities. But we are not concerned here with Marx's own history-writing any more than with his socialism. What we want to get at is the standpoint for interpretation. Marx himself, in the preface to the first edition of *Capital*, says that his standpoint is one "from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history". This sounds like the merest commonplace. Human history is thrown in line with that of the rest of nature. The scope is widened to include every factor, and the greatest one is that which deals with the maintenance of life and the attainment of comfort. So far so good. But Marx had not been a pupil of Hegel for nothing. He, too, went on to absolutes, simply turning Hegel's upside down. With him "the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind". The world is the thing, not the idea. So he goes on to make man, the modifier of nature, with growing control over it, but a function of it—a tool of the tool, just when he has mastered it by new inventions.

But strange as it may seem, Marx's scheme, like Buckle's, culminates in mind, not in matter. The first part is economic purely. The industrial proletarians—"the workers", as socialism fondly terms them—are, like capitalism, the product of economic forces. The factory not only binds the shackles upon the wage-slaves of today, it even fills the swarming *ergastula* of city slums by the stimulation of child labor. So the process continues until the proletariat, as a last result of its economic situation, acquires a common consciousness. Then what happens? The future is not to be as the past. Consciousness means intelligence, and as soon as the proletariat *understands*, it can burst shackles, master economics, and so control instead of blindly obeying the movement of its creative energy. Whether socialism would achieve the object of its faith and hope is not for us to consider, but the point remains, that in the ultimate analysis, even the economic interpretation of history ends uneconomically. It ends in directing intelligence, in ideals of justice, of social and moral order.

Now where are we? We have passed in review the mythological,

theological, philosophical, materialistic, and economic interpretations of history, and have found that none of these, stated in their extremest forms, meets the situation. Pure theology or metaphysics omits or distorts the history it is supposed to explain; history is not its proper business. Materialism and economics, while more promising because more earthly, cannot be pressed beyond a certain point. Life itself escapes their analysis. The conclusion is this: that we have two main elements in our problem which must be brought together—the psychic on the one hand, the material on the other. Not until psychology and the natural and economic sciences shall have been turned upon the problem, working in co-operation as allies, not as rivals, will history be able to give an intelligent account of itself. They will need more data than we have at present. The only economics which can promise scientific results is that based upon the statistical method, for, in spite of Bergson, brilliant guesses can hardly satisfy unless they are verified. The natural sciences are only beginning to show the intimate relation of life to its environment, and psychology has hardly begun the study of the group. But one sees already a growing appreciation of common interests, a desire on the part of economists to know the nature of the mechanism of the universe whose working they attempt to describe; an inquiry from the biologist as to the validity of un-eugenic social reform.

Now the interpretation of history lies here, with these co-operative workers upon the mystery of life and of its environment, and their interplay. That does not mean that history is to be explained from the outside. More economics means more history—if it is good economics. Marx, for instance, attempted to state both facts and processes of industrial history, Malthus of population, Ricardo of wages, etc. Both facts and processes are the stuff of history. The statement of a process may be glorified into a “law”, but a “law” merely means a general fact of history. It holds good under certain conditions, which are either historical or purely imaginary, and it is only in the latter case that it lies outside the field of history. It is the same with psychology as with economics. It supplies an analysis of action, and action is history. Explanation is more knowledge of the same thing. All inductive study of society is historical.

The interpretations of history are historical in another sense. Looking back over the way we have come, from Greek philosophers to modern economists and psychologists, one can see in every case that the interpretation was but the reflex of the local environment, the expression of the dominant interest of the time. History became critical in that meeting place of East and West, the Ionian coast of Asia Minor, where divergent civilizations were opened up

for contrast with each new trireme from the south and west and where travellers destroyed credulity. In the same way, as we have traced it, the isolated landed society of the Middle Ages, with its absence of business and its simple relationships, could rest complacent with an Augustinian world-view. Nothing else was demanding explanation. When business produced a Florence and Florence a Machiavelli, we have a gleam of newer things, just as Voltaire and Hume mirror the influences of Galileo, and the voyages to China. With the nineteenth century the situation becomes more complicated, and yet one can see the interpretation of history merely projecting into the past—or drawing out of it—the meaning of each present major interest. Kant and Hegel fit into the era of ideologues and nationalist romanticists; and their implications are developed under the reaction following the French Revolution. Buckle draws his inspiration from the trend of science which produced—in the same year—the *Origin of Species*. Marx is the interpreter of the Industrial Revolution.

But this does not mean that interpretations of history are nothing more than the injection into it of successive prejudices. It means progressive clarification. Each new theory that forces itself upon the attention of historians brings up new data for their consideration and so widens the field of investigation. The greater knowledge of our world to-day reveals the smallness of our knowledge of the past, and from every side scholars are hastening to make the content of history more worthy of comparison with the content of science. From this point of view, therefore, interpretation, instead of assuming the position of a final judge of conduct or an absolute law, becomes only a suggestive stimulus for further research.

We have, therefore, an historical interpretation of interpretations themselves. It accepts two main factors, material and psychical, not concerning itself about the ultimate reality of either. It is not its business to consider ultimate realities, though it may be grateful for any light upon the subject. Less ambitious than theological, philosophical, or even economic theories, it views itself as part of the very process which it attempts to understand. If it has no ecstatic glimpses of finality, it shares at least to the full the exhilaration of the scientific quest. It risks no premature fate in the delusive security of an inner consciousness. When you ask it "Why?" it answers "What?"

J. T. SHOTWELL.



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