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IX

THE HISTORY OF MAN*

NO REALITY IS more essential to our self-awareness than history. It shows us the broadest horizon of mankind, brings us the contents of tradition upon which our life is built, shows us standards by which to measure the present, frees us from unconscious bondage to our own age, teaches us to see man in his highest potentialities and his imperishable creations.

We can make no better use of leisure than to familiarize ourselves and keep ourselves familiar with the glories of the past and the catastrophes in which everything has been shattered. We gain a better understanding of our present experience if we see it in the mirror of history. And history becomes alive for us when we regard it in the light of our own age. Our life becomes richer when past and present illumine one another.

It is only the concrete, particular history which is close to us that truly concerns us. Yet in our philosophical approach to history we inevitably deal in certain abstractions.

History sometimes appears to be a chaos of accidental happenings, an eddying flood. It passes on, from one turmoil, from one catastrophe to the next, with brief intervals of happiness, little islands which it

* In this chapter certain passages from my book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* have been reproduced verbatim.

spares for a time, until they too are engulfed. All in all—as Max Weber put it—a road paved by the devil with demolished values.

True, our insight has revealed certain connections, causal relations, such as the effects of technological inventions on working methods, of working methods on social structures, of conquests on ethnic grouping, of military technique on military organization and of military organization on political structure, and so on ad infinitum. And beyond causality we also find certain total aspects, as in the succession of cultural styles over a series of generations, as epochs of culture each rooting in the one before it, as great self-contained culture-bodies in their development. Spengler and his followers saw such cultures growing out of the mass of vegetating mankind like plants springing from the soil, flowering and dying, and having little or no bearing upon one another; Spengler counted eight of them up to our time, Toynbee twenty-one.

Seen in this way history has no meaning, no unity and no structure, but reveals only innumerable chains of causality and morphological organisms such as occur in the natural process (except that in history they can be defined with far less precision).

But the philosophy of history implies the search for meaning, unity, and structure in history. It can deal only with mankind as a whole.

Let us draw up a brief outline of history.

Men have been living for hundreds of thousands of years; this is proved by bones found in geological strata which can be dated. For tens of thousands of years there have been men exactly like us anatomically,

as is shown by paintings and remains of tools. But it is only for the last five to six thousand years that we have had a documented, coherent history.

History breaks down into four basic segments:

First: We can only infer the first great steps toward the use of language, the invention of tools, the kindling and use of fire. This is the Promethean age, the foundation of all history, through which man became man in distinction to a purely biologically defined human species, of which we can scarcely conceive. When this was, over what vast periods of time the process extended, we do not know. But this age must be situated in the very remote past and it must have been many times longer than the comparatively insignificant span of time covered by our documented historical era.

Second: The ancient high civilizations grew up between 5000 and 3000 B.C. in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and on the Indus, somewhat later on the Hwang River in China. These are little islands of light amid the broad mass of mankind which already populated the whole planet.

Third: In the years centring around 500 B.C.—from 800 to 200—the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid, simultaneously and independently in China, India, Persia, Palestine, and Greece. And these are the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today.

Fourth: Since then there has been only one entirely new, spiritually and materially incisive event, equal to the others in historical significance: the age of science and technology. It was foreshadowed in Europe at the

end of the Middle Ages; its theoretical groundwork was laid in the seventeenth century; at the end of the eighteenth century it entered on a period of broad growth, and in the last few decades it has advanced at a headlong pace.

Let us cast a glance at the third segment, that of the years around 500 B.C. Hegel has said, "All history moves toward Christ and from Christ. The appearance of the Son of God is the axis of history." Our calendar reminds us every day of this Christian structure of history. The flaw in this view of history is that it can have meaning only for believing Christians. But even Western Christians have not built their empirical view of history on their faith but have drawn an essential distinction between sacred and profane history.

If there is an axis in history, we must find it empirically in profane history, as a set of circumstances significant for all men, including Christians. It must carry conviction for Westerners, Asiatics, and all men, without the support of any particular content of faith, and thus provide all men with a common historical frame of reference.

The spiritual process which took place between 800 and 200 B.C. seems to constitute such an axis. It was then that the man with whom we live today came into being. Let us designate this period as the "axial age." Extraordinary events are crowded into this period. In China lived Confucius and Lao Tse, all the trends in Chinese philosophy arose, it was the era of Mo Tse, Chuang Tse and countless others. In India it was the

age of the Upanishads and of Buddha; as in China, all philosophical trends, including skepticism and materialism, sophistry and nihilism, were developed. In Iran Zarathustra put forward his challenging conception of the cosmic process as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine prophets arose: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah; Greece produced Homer, the philosophers Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, the tragic poets, Thucydides, and Archimedes. All the vast development of which these names are a mere intimation took place in these few centuries, independently and almost simultaneously in China, India, and the West.

The new element in this age is that man everywhere became aware of being as a whole, of himself and his limits. He experienced the horror of the world and his own helplessness. He raised radical questions, approached the abyss in his drive for liberation and redemption. And in consciously apprehending his limits he set himself the highest aims. He experienced the absolute in the depth of selfhood and in the clarity of transcendence.

Conflicting possibilities were explored. Discussion, partisanship, intellectual schisms (though within a common frame of reference) gave rise to movement and unrest bordering on spiritual chaos.

This era produced the basic categories in which we still think and created the world religions out of which men still live.

The opinions, customs, conditions which had hitherto enjoyed unconscious acceptance came to be questioned. The world was thrown into turmoil.

The mythical age with its peace of mind and self-evident truths was ended. This was the beginning of the struggle—based on rationality and empirical experience—against the myth; of the battle against the demons for the transcendence of the one God; ethical indignation waged war on false gods. Myths were transformed and infused with deep meaning in the very moment when the myth as such was destroyed.

Man was no longer self-contained. He was uncertain of himself, hence open to new and boundless possibilities.

For the first time there were philosophers. Men dared to stand upon their own feet as individuals. Hermits and wandering thinkers in China, ascetics in India, philosophers in Greece, prophets in Israel may be grouped together, greatly as they differ in faith, ideas, and inner attitude. Man opposed his own inwardness to the whole world. He discovered in himself the primal source, by virtue of which he might rise above himself and the world.

And in that same era man gained awareness of history. It was an age of extraordinary beginnings, but men felt and knew that an infinite past had gone before. Even in this first awakening of the truly human spirit man was sustained by memory, he had consciousness of lateness, even of decadence.

Men strove to plan and control the course of events, to restore desirable conditions or produce them for the first time. Thinkers speculated as to how men might best live together, as to how they might best be administered and governed. It was an age of reform.

And the sociological conditions of all three regions reveal analogies: innumerable petty states and cities, a struggle of all against all, and yet at first an astonishing prosperity.

But these centuries in which so much happened were not characterized by a simple ascending development. There was destruction and creation at once, and there was no fulfilment. The supreme potentialities realized in individuals did not become a common heritage. What started out as freedom of movement became anarchy in the end. Once the era lost its creative impetus, ideas congealed into dogmas and a levelling occurred in all three spheres. As the disorder grew intolerable, men sought new bonds and new stability.

The end was first characterized by political developments. Vast despotic empires arose almost simultaneously in China (Tsin, Shi, Huangti), in India (the Maurya dynasty), in the West (the Hellenistic empires and the Imperium Romanum). Everywhere systematic order and technical organization emerged from the collapse.

The spiritual life of men is still oriented toward the axial age. China, India, and the West have all witnessed conscious attempts to restore it, renaissances. True, there have been great new spiritual creations but they have been inspired by ideas acquired in the axial age.

Thus the main line of history runs from the birth of humanity through the civilizations of high antiquity to the axial age and its offshoots, which

played a creative role up to the dawn of our own era.

Since then a new line would seem to have begun. Our age of science and technology is a kind of second beginning, comparable to the first invention of tools and fire-making.

If we may venture a presumption by analogy, we shall pass through vast planned organizations analogous to those of Egypt and the other ancient high civilizations, from which the ancient Jews emigrated and on which, when they laid a new foundation, they looked back with hatred as a place of forced labour. Perhaps mankind will pass through these giant organizations to a new axial age, still remote, invisible, and inconceivable, an axial age of authentic human upsurge.

But today we are living in an era of the most terrible catastrophes. It seems as though everything that had been transmitted to us were being melted down, and yet there is no convincing sign that a new edifice is in the making.

What is new is that in our day history is for the first time becoming world-wide in scope. Measured by the unity which modern communications have given to the globe, all previous history is a mere aggregate of local histories.

What we formerly called history is ended—an intermediary moment of five thousand years between the prehistoric centuries in which the globe was populated and the world history which is now beginning. These millennia, measured by the preceding era of man's existence and by future possibilities, are a minute interval. In this interval men may be said to

have gathered together, to have mustered their forces for the action of world history, to have acquired the intellectual and technical equipment they needed for the journey which is just beginning.

We must look to horizons such as these when we incline to take a dark view of the realities of our day and to regard all human history as lost. We are justified in believing in the future potentialities of humanity. In the short view all is gloom, in the long view it is not. But this becomes evident only in the light of history as a whole.

The more fully we realize ourselves in the present, seeking the truth and ascertaining the criteria of humanity, the more confidently we may look to the future.

And now, as to the *meaning* of history. Those who believe that the historical process has an aim often strive to realize it by planning.

But we become aware of our helplessness when we seek to plan and organize history as a whole. The overweening plans of rulers, based upon a supposed total knowledge of history, have always ended in catastrophe. The plans devised by individuals in their restricted circles fail or else contribute to unleashing quite different, unplanned complexes of events. The historical process can be seen either as an irresistible mechanism or as an infinitely interpretable meaning which manifests itself by unexpected new events, which remains always equivocal, a meaning which, even when we entrust ourselves to it, is never known to us.

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If we seek the meaning of history in a movement toward some ultimate state of happiness on earth, we find no corroboration in any conceivable view of past history. On the contrary, the whole chaotic course of human history, with its modest successes and total catastrophes, argues against such meaning. The meaning of history cannot be formulated in terms of an aim.

Every aim is particular, provisional, and capable of being transcended. It is only by ignoring essential facts that we can interpret the whole of history as the story of a single decision.

What does God want of men? Perhaps a general answer may be ventured: History is the stage upon which man can reveal what he is, what he can be, what he can become, of what he is capable. Even the greatest threat is a challenge to man. Man's ascent cannot be measured only in terms of security.

But history means far more: it is the stage on which the being of the godhead is revealed. Being is revealed in man through his dealings with other men. For God does not disclose himself in history in any single, exclusive way. Potentially each man stands in immediate relation to God. Amid all the diversity of history we must give the unique, the irreplaceable, its due.

From all this it follows that if I attempt to foresee tangible happiness in the form of perfection on earth, of a human paradise, I can expect nothing; but I can expect everything if I am oriented toward the profound humanity which opens up with faith in God. I can hope for nothing if I look only outward; for

everything if, partaking of the primal source, I entrust myself to transcendence.

We cannot define the ultimate aim of history but we can posit an aim which is itself a premise for the realization of the highest human potentialities. And that is the *unity of mankind*.

Unity cannot be achieved through any rational, scientific universal. This would produce a unity of the understanding but not of mankind. Nor does unity reside in a universal religion, such as might be arrived at through discussion at religious congresses. Nor can it be realized through a conventional language based on reason and common sense. Unity can be gained only from the depth of historicity, not as a common, knowable content but in boundless communication of the historically different in never-ending dialogue, rising to heights of noble emulation.

A dialogue of this sort, which will be worthy of man, requires an area of freedom from violence. A practical unity of men striving for such an area of nonviolence seems conceivable, and many have already taken it as their goal. This goal of unifying mankind at least on the basic levels of life, which does not imply a common and universal faith, does not seem entirely utopian. Its realization will require a stubborn political struggle against the powers that be—and our very situation may well drive us into such a struggle.

Prerequisite for such a unity is a political form upon which all can agree, since it provides the best possible basis of freedom for all. This form, which only in the

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West has been developed in theory and in part realized, is the constitutional state built on elections and on laws which are subject to modification solely by legal means. In such a state men battle to gain recognition for the just cause, to win public opinion through widespread and enlightened education and the unreserved dissemination of news.

There would be no wars in a constitutional world order where no state would possess absolute sovereignty but mankind itself, acting through its constitutional organs, would be sovereign.

But if humanity desires communication and aspires to end violence through a constitutional order which, though unjust, is moving toward justice, we shall not be helped by an optimism born of enthusiasm for such ideas, which sees the future as all bright. For we have every reason to take the opposite view.

We see, each of us in ourself, the self-will, the resistance to self-elucidation, the sophistry, with which even philosophy is used as an instrument of obfuscation; we see rejection of the unfamiliar in the place of communication. We see the pleasure men take in power and violence; we see how the masses are swept into war; stricken with blind lust for gain and adventure, willing to sacrifice everything, even their lives. On the other hand we see the unwillingness of the masses to deprive themselves, to save, to work patiently and quietly toward the building of stable conditions; and we see the passions which force their way almost unobstructed into the background of the mind.

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And quite apart from the character of men, we see the irremediable injustice of all institutions, we see situations which cannot be solved by justice, the situations arising for example from the increase and redistribution of the population or from the exclusive possession by one group of something which all desire and which cannot be divided.

Hence there seems almost to be an inevitable limit at which violence in some form must again break through. Once again we are faced with the question: is it God or the devil who governs the world? And though we may believe that ultimately the devil is in the service of God, there is no proof of it.

When in our isolation we see our lives seeping away as a mere succession of moments, tossed meaninglessly about by accidents and overwhelming events; when we contemplate a history that seems to be at an end, leaving only chaos behind it, then we are impelled to raise ourselves above history.

Yet we must remain aware of our epoch and our situation. A modern philosophy cannot develop without elucidating its roots in time and in a particular place. But even though we are subject to the conditions of our epoch, it is not from these conditions that we draw our philosophy, but now as at all times from the Comprehensive. We must not adjust our potentialities to the low level of our age, not subordinate ourselves to our epoch, but attempt, by elucidating the age, to arrive at the point where we can live out of our primal source.

Nor must we deify history. We need not accept the

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godless maxim that history is the last judgment. It is no ultimate instance. Failure is no argument against the truth that is rooted in transcendence. By making history our own, we cast an anchor through history into eternity.