

WHAT IS HISTORY

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What Is History?

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**“I often think it odd that it should be so dull,
for a great deal of it must be invention.”**

**Catherine Morland on History
(*Northanger Abbey*, Ch. XIV)**

CONTENTS

I	THE HISTORIAN AND HIS FACTS	3
II	SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL	36
III	HISTORY, SCIENCE, AND MORALITY	70
IV	CAUSATION IN HISTORY	113
V	HISTORY AS PROGRESS	144
VI	THE WIDENING HORIZON	177
	INDEX	follows page 209

pretations always involve moral judgments—or, if you prefer a more neutral-sounding term, value judgments.

This is, however, only the beginning of our difficulties. History is a process of struggle in which results, whether we judge them good or bad, are achieved by some groups directly or indirectly—and more often directly than indirectly—at the expense of others. The losers pay. Suffering is indigenous in history. Every great period of history has its casualties as well as its victories. This is an exceedingly complicated question because we have no measure which enables us to balance the greater good of some against the sacrifices of others: yet some such balance must be struck. It is not exclusively a problem of history. In ordinary life we are more often involved than we sometimes care to admit in the necessity of preferring the lesser evil, or of doing evil that good may come. In history the question is sometimes discussed under the rubric “the cost of progress” or “the price of revolution.” This is misleading. As Bacon says in the essay *On Innovations*, “the forward retention of custom is as turbulent a thing as an innovation.” The cost of conservation falls just as heavily on the under-privileged as the cost of innovation on those who are deprived of their privileges. The thesis that the good of some justifies the sufferings of others is implicit in all government, and is just as much a conservative as a radical doctrine. Dr. Johnson robustly invoked the argument of the lesser evil to justify the maintenance of existing inequalities:

It is better that some should be unhappy than that none should be happy, which would be the case in a general state of equality.⁵

But it is in periods of radical change that the issue appears in its most dramatic form; and it is here that we find it easiest to study the attitude of the historian towards it.

Let us take the story of the industrialization of Great Britain between, say, about 1780 and 1870. Virtually every historian will treat the industrial revolution, probably without discussion, as a great and progressive achievement. He will also describe the driving of the peasantry off the land, the herding of workers in unhealthy factories and unsanitary dwellings, the exploitation of child labour. He will probably say that abuses occurred in the working of the system, and that some employers were more ruthless than others, and will dwell with some unction on the gradual growth of a humanitarian conscience once the system has become established. But he will assume, again probably without saying it, that measures of coercion and exploitation, at any rate in the first stages, were an unavoidable part of the cost of industrialization. Nor

⁵ Boswell: *Life of Doctor Johnson*, 1791 (Everyman ed. ii, 20). This has the merit of candour; Burckhardt (*Judgments on History and Historians*, p. 85) sheds tears over the "silenced moans" of the victims of progress, "who, as a rule, had wanted nothing else but *parta tueri*," but is himself silent about the moans of the victims of the *ancien régime* who, as a rule, had nothing to preserve.

have I ever heard of a historian who said that, in view of the cost, it would have been better to stay the hand of progress and not industrialize; if any such exists, he doubtless belongs to the school of Chesterton and Belloc, and will—quite properly—not be taken seriously by serious historians. This example is of particular interest to me, because I hope soon in my history of Soviet Russia to approach the problem of the collectivization of the peasant as a part of the cost of industrialization; and I know well that if, following the example of historians of the British industrial revolution, I deplore the brutalities and abuses of collectivization, but treat the process as an unavoidable part of the cost of a desirable and necessary policy of industrialization, I shall incur charges of cynicism and of condoning evil things. Historians condone the nineteenth-century colonization of Asia and Africa by the Western nations on the ground not only of its immediate effects on the world economy, but of its long-term consequences for the backward peoples of these continents. After all, it is said, modern India is the child of British rule; and modern China is the product of nineteenth-century Western imperialism, crossed with the influence of the Russian revolution. Unfortunately it was not the Chinese workers who laboured in the Western-owned factories in the treaty ports, or in the South African mines, or on the Western front in the First World War, who have survived to enjoy whatever glory or profit may have accrued from the Chinese revolution. Those who pay the cost are

rarely those who reap the benefits. The well-known purple passage from Engels is uncomfortably apt:

History is about the most cruel of all goddesses, and she leads her triumphal car over heaps of corpses, not only in war, but also in "peaceful" economic development. And we men and women are unfortunately so stupid that we never pluck up courage for real progress unless urged to it by sufferings that seem almost out of proportion.⁶

Ivan Karamazov's famous gesture of defiance is a heroic fallacy. We are born into society, we are born into history. No moment occurs when we are offered a ticket of admission with the option to accept or reject it. The historian has no more conclusive answer than the theologian to the problem of suffering. He, too, falls back on the thesis of the lesser evil and the greater good.

But does not the fact that the historian, unlike the scientist, becomes involved by the nature of his material in these issues of moral judgment imply the submission of history to a super-historical standard of value? I do not think that it does. Let us assume that abstract conceptions like "good" and "bad," and more sophisticated developments of them, lie beyond the confines of history. But, even so, these abstractions play in the study of historical morality much the same role as mathematical and logical formulas in physical science. They are indispensable categories of thought;

⁶ Letter of February 24, 1893, to Danielson in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Correspondence 1846-1895* (London: Lawrence & Wishart; 1934), p. 510.

but they are devoid of meaning or application till specific content is put into them. If you prefer a different metaphor, the moral precepts which we apply in history or in everyday life are like cheques on a bank: they have a printed and a written part. The printed part consists of abstract words like liberty and equality, justice and democracy. These are essential categories. But the cheque is valueless until we fill in the other part, which states how much liberty we propose to allocate to whom, whom we recognize as our equals, and up to what amount. The way in which we fill in the cheque from time to time is a matter of history. The process by which specific historical content is given to abstract moral conceptions is a historical process; indeed, our moral judgments are made within a conceptual framework which is itself the creation of history. The favourite form of contemporary international controversy on moral issues is a debate on rival claims to freedom and democracy. The conceptions are abstract and universal. But the content put into them has varied throughout history, from time to time and from place to place; any practical issue of their application can be understood and debated only in historical terms. To take a slightly less popular example, the attempt has been made to use the conception of "economic rationality" as an objective and non-controversial criterion by which the desirability of economic policies can be tested and judged. The attempt at once breaks down. Theorists brought up on the laws of classical economics condemn planning in

principle as an irrational intrusion into rational economic processes; for example, planners refuse in their price policy to be bound by the law of supply and demand, and prices under planning can have no rational basis. It may, of course, be true that planners often behave irrationally, and therefore foolishly. But the criterion by which they must be judged is not the old “economic rationality” of classical economy. Personally, I have more sympathy with the converse argument that it was the uncontrolled, unorganized *laissez-faire* economy which was essentially irrational, and that planning is an attempt to introduce “economic rationality” into the process. But the only point which I wish to make at the moment is the impossibility of erecting an abstract and super-historical standard by which historical actions can be judged. Both sides inevitably read into such a standard the specific content appropriate to their own historical conditions and aspirations.

This is the real indictment of those who seek to erect a super-historical standard or criterion in the light of which judgment is passed on historical events or situations—whether that standard derives from some divine authority postulated by the theologians, and from a static reason or nature postulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. It is not that shortcomings occur in the application of the standard, or defects in the standard itself. It is that the attempt to erect such a standard is unhistorical and contradicts the very essence of history. It provides a dogmatic

answer to questions which the historian is bound by his vocation incessantly to ask: the historian who accepts answers in advance to these questions goes to work with his eyes blindfolded, and renounces his vocation. History is movement; and movement implies comparison. That is why historians tend to express their moral judgments in words of a comparative nature like "progressive" and "reactionary" rather than in uncompromising absolutes like "good" and "bad"; these are attempts to define different societies or historical phenomena not in relation to some absolute standard, but in their relation to one another. Moreover, when we examine these supposedly absolute and extra-historical values, we find that they too are in fact rooted to history. The emergence of a particular value or ideal at a given time or place is explained by historical conditions of place and time. The practical content of hypothetical absolutes like equality, liberty, justice, or natural law varies from period to period, or from continent to continent. Every group has its own values which are rooted in history. Every group protects itself against the intrusion of alien and inconvenient values, which it brands by opprobrious epithets as bourgeois and capitalist, or undemocratic and totalitarian, or, more crudely still, as un-English and un-American. The abstract standard or value, divorced from society and divorced from history, is as much an illusion as the abstract individual. The serious historian is the one who recognizes the historically conditioned character of all values, not the one who claims

for his own values an objectivity beyond history. The beliefs which we hold and the standards of judgment which we set up are part of history, and are as much subject to historical investigation as any other aspect of human behaviour. Few sciences today—least of all, the social sciences—would lay claim to total independence. But history has no fundamental dependence on something outside itself which would differentiate it from any other science.

Let me sum up what I have tried to say about the claim of history to be included among the sciences. The word science already covers so many different branches of knowledge, employing so many different methods and techniques, that the onus seems to rest on those who seek to exclude history rather than those who seek to include it. It is significant that the arguments for exclusion come not from scientists anxious to exclude historians from their select company, but from historians and philosophers anxious to vindicate the status of history as a branch of humane letters. The dispute reflects the prejudice of the old division between the humanities and science, in which the humanities were supposed to represent the broad culture of the ruling class, and science the skills of the technicians who served it. The words "humanities" and "humane" are themselves in this context a survival of this time-honoured prejudice; and the fact that the antithesis between science and history will not make sense

in any language but English suggests the peculiarly insular character of the prejudice. My principal objection to the refusal to call history a science is that it justifies and perpetuates the rift between the so-called "two cultures." The rift itself is a product of this ancient prejudice, based on a class structure of English society which itself belongs to the past; and I am myself not convinced that the chasm which separates the historian from the geologist is any deeper or more unbridgeable than the chasm which separates the geologist from the physicist. But the way to mend the rift is not, in my view, to teach elementary science to historians or elementary history to scientists. This is a blind alley into which we have been led by muddled thinking. After all, scientists themselves do not behave in this way. I have never heard of engineers being advised to attend elementary classes in botany.

One remedy I would suggest is to improve the standard of our history, to make it—if I may dare to say so—more scientific, to make our demands on those who pursue it more rigorous. History as an academic discipline in this university is sometimes thought of as a catch-all for those who find classics too difficult and science too serious. One impression which I hope to convey in these lectures is that history is a far more difficult subject than classics, and quite as serious as any science. But this remedy would imply a stronger faith among historians themselves in what they are doing. Sir Charles Snow, in a recent lecture on this

theme, had a point when he contrasted the "brash" optimism of the scientist with the "subdued voice" and "anti-social feeling" of what he called the "literary intellectual."⁷ Some historians—and more of those who write about history without being historians—belong to this category of "literary intellectuals." They are so busy telling us that history is not a science, and explaining what it cannot and should not be or do, that they have no time for its achievements and its potentialities.

The other way to heal the rift is to promote a profounder understanding of the identity of aim between scientists and historians, and this is the main value of the new and growing interest in the history and philosophy of science. Scientists, social scientists, and historians are all engaged in different branches of the same study: the study of man and his environment, of the effects of man on his environment and of his environment on man. The object of the study is the same: to increase man's understanding of, and mastery over, his environment. The presuppositions and the methods of the physicist, the geologist, the psychologist, and the historian differ widely in detail; nor do I wish to commit myself to the proposition that, in order to be more scientific, the historian must follow more closely the methods of physical science. But historian and physical scientist are united in the funda-

⁷ C. P. Snow: *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (London: Macmillan & Co.; 1959), pp. 4-8.

mental purpose of seeking to explain, and in the fundamental procedure of question and answer. The historian, like any other scientist, is an animal who incessantly asks the question: Why? In my next lecture I shall examine the ways in which he puts the question and in which he attempts to answer it.

CHAPTER IV

CAUSATION IN HISTORY

IF MILK is set to boil in a saucepan, it boils over. I do not know, and have never wanted to know, why this happens; if pressed, I should probably attribute it to a propensity in milk to boil over, which is true enough but explains nothing. But then I am not a natural scientist. In the same way, one can read, or even write, about the events of the past without wanting to know why they happened, or be content to say that the Second World War occurred because Hitler wanted war, which is true enough but explains nothing. But one should not then commit the solecism of calling oneself a student of history or a historian. The study of history is a study of causes. The historian, as I said at the end of my last lecture, continuously asks the question: Why?; and, so long as he hopes for an answer, he cannot rest. The great historian—or perhaps I should say more broadly, the great thinker—is the man who asks the question: Why?, about new things or in new contexts.

Herodotus, the father of history, defined his purpose in the opening of his work: to preserve a memory of the deeds of the Greeks and the barbarians, “and in particular, beyond everything else, to give the cause of their fighting one another.” He found few disciples