

Current Problems

Historical Change

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HISTORICAL CHANGE

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I. INTRODUCTION

This is an attempt to sketch the meaning of change as it affects history. History treats of varied and intricate human activities through the ages, but these pages contain only a fragmentary effort to explore briefly the nature of certain problems that pertain to historical change. A few illustrations have been selected almost at random for this purpose, in order to show some of the aspects of change that can be found in history. They are generally familiar and for the most part of recent interest, for many of them have been found in the practices of the dictators. Many others will easily suggest themselves to anyone.

By whatever avenues it is approached and under whatever shape it is presented, history is always a demonstration of power that is carried out by the medium of continuous change. History necessarily creates change, and the record of human events implies the continuity of change. But power is a substance that is derived from a number of different sources which flow with uneven volume and speed. Its origin can be military or political, economic, moral or ecclesiastical: power may be spasmodic or it can emanate from the sudden violence of a mob. The different elements that compose it will blend in uneven proportions according to their strength, so that they will express themselves in history in different ways and with different consequences. The

pressure which they exercise leads to innumerable experiences which, in spite of frequent superficial resemblances both of cause and purpose, will never be identical. But the effects of these experiences, irrespective of how they are produced, will always be registered by changes, some deliberate and direct, some unintentional and indirect, and some also provoked by counter-movements.

Changes will also be superposed, so to speak, on that continuous and permanent flow which is inherent to life but which when left without specific direction tends to adjust itself functionally to its environment. This takes place by automatic processes rather than by a planned effort. The latter occurs when authority is firmly held or when men try to seize power in order to give a more precise direction to their purposes than by the normal flow of change so that they can quicken its speed and increase its volume: The procedure in itself contributes to change, and the same thing happens when an effort is made in the opposite direction, and when men try by artificial or forceful means to divert the flow into other channels.

History offers no problem of greater importance than to explore the many reasons for change. By what laws can one explain its origin or its intermittence and the varying speed of its rhythm, sometimes so slow over long periods as to seem stagnant, at others racing headlong with all the violence of a mountain torrent? To affirm that change results from a continuous conflict between rival tendencies

or forces and then follows from a clash or fusion of opposite or cross-currents only pushes further back the difficulty. To describe change as something that is brought about by the spread of certain visible or invisible ferments of varying strength does not solve the problem of how these ferments have originated.

Some will argue for a belief that historical sequence proceeds in accordance with a plan or design which is divine or material, as writers with a theological or a Marxist bias maintain. Others will find that events are merely fortuitous or accidental, or else so limited in their real significance that they seem like passing ripples on the surface of time. Such speculations do not need to concern us here—any more than an inquiry into the causes of change need follow the customary schematic divisions of history. Historians are somewhat prone to bisect periods into convenient categories arranged by date and subject, and to believe that they are approaching the truth by this method. When they dub an age by the name of some dominating figure or because they discern in its annals some salient feature, they may also neglect or minimize other important factors because these remain silent below the surface, or inarticulate. Such customary partitions in spite of their plausibility and convenience are usually somewhat arbitrary and incomplete, for too often they tend to leave out important matters and to place others that afterwards come to the fore in a false perspective. As change is eternal it has neither a real beginning nor an end

and, perhaps, it can be approached as well from one direction as from another.

It might be tempting to trace the growth of change by pin-pointing some particular phase of history, but to do this would result in many omissions. For a sketch which only aims to indicate the broad nature of the subject it seemed preferable to select even haphazardly, from the chronicle of past and present, a wide variety of the different causes of change in their general relation to such questions as the character of power, the use of ideas, and the role of leadership. The illustrations chosen are barely outlined and necessarily incomplete, with little connection existing between them other than the general relation which they bear to a common subject. Their range may, however, serve to bring out certain different aspects of an intricate and difficult problem still imperfectly understood and for which no satisfactory method of approach has as yet been devised. This brief study will not have been written in vain if it should lead to any fruitful suggestions for those who to-day, or in the future, may try to discover novel ways of interpreting historical change.

The emphasis of history is commonly placed on events, rather than on the relations, that are not always visible, which events bear to the causes that precede, or the consequences that follow them. Behind every historical act is always a human element to explain why it is impossible to account for change only in a mechanical way. Certain thinkers have tried to discover general principles underneath so as to establish

historical causation and connect history with philosophy. But pure speculation of this order leads away from life, and rigid theories when they are applied to the inconstancy of change would be a contradiction in terms. Nor can the nature of change be interpreted by any supposedly scientific method. Yet between the lofty citadel of philosophy and the low ramparts of history there stretches a largely uncultivated field where one may hope to search for the meaning that change bears to historical action.

Historical change may be compared to a multiple cinematograph that projects a continuously different programme. As a process of nature, change means something that is inherent to life, and is in fact inseparable from existence. The great distinction between the human species and all other forms of life is that only in man can change be produced by a receptiveness to ideas, so that in this way it becomes a conscious act emanating from the will. Physical and material reasons can also influence the human mind and contribute to bring about such acts, but beyond these there is nearly always a remaining residue that is too elusive to be easily explained by any theory.

Every act great or small makes for some change, but by itself change, until it is defined, is only a vague word that covers a wide range. Yet the necessity for change lies deep at the roots of history, at the same time as it is expressed on the surface by something that is infinitely varied. For change is so much a vital accompaniment of everything living that we

are prone to forget the significance and diversity of its continuous relation to historical events.

The course of history can be likened to the flow of a great stream as it runs down to the ocean. There are places where the swift current will break its force against hidden rocks. When the winter snows have melted the river may burst its dikes and flood the countryside. During the summer drought the flow can be sluggish and great sand bars will appear above the surface. But also over long distances the river will flow peacefully and majestically toward an unknown sea.

II. UNNOTICED GROWTHS AND CHANGES BY DECREE

Shortly after the Revolution broke out in Russia in 1917, a brief item appeared in the Western press that a handful of communists, who lived for years in obscure exile at Geneva, had been helped by the German General Staff to return to Petrograd in a sealed carriage. The Germans accomplished their immediate purpose, to take Russia out of the War, better than they dared to hope, but even the far-sighted General Staff could not have guessed that their own doom would come later at the hands of a regime which they had helped to establish.

Communist plots hatched in cafés at Geneva, and prophecies of world Empire shouted after the defeat

of Germany in the vaults of Munich beer cellars, do not usually come into the news. Why should anyone attach importance to an obscure Austrian corporal who raved wildly about politics to six other unknown and ignorant men with whom he founded a new party that had some absurd aims? Two events which were to lead soon after to some of the greatest changes in world history passed virtually unnoticed at a time when publicity is given to the slightest occurrence. There is nothing surprising in this circumstance. Revolutionary movements start invariably below the surface. Inflammable matter is easy to detect when it has been stacked in the open but harder to discover when it is concealed. Only in silent obscurity is it possible to acquire that early momentum which afterwards helps its diffusion. Organized publicity can even unwittingly assist this process by diverting public attention to more conspicuous matters. Likely enough later historians will discover that ideas and events unobserved to-day or regarded as insignificant may turn out to be of great importance to the future. It would be a bold man who ventured to assert that things were not happening unnoticed even now which will again alter the course of history. It may be as difficult to pick these out from amid the confusion of multiple events as it would be to detect the fish that later will be hatched from a salmon's spawn.

Two thousand years ago, Polybius asked the question of what use was a statesman who could not reckon how, why, and whence, events originated. And he observed that the causes which lead to events

must be guarded against, for great movements often originated from trifles (*History*, III, 6). In times of crisis a statesman will find himself confronted by a difficult dilemma. He may be acutely aware of the existence of deep currents of unrest that lie below the surface without being able to gauge their strength with any accuracy. Is he to yield to vague threats or to suppress opposition and risk a violent explosion, or to adopt a middle course of concession? Often he begins by trying the latter, rarely to the satisfaction of either side. The failure to handle a rapidly shifting situation of this kind may be due to a weakness of character, or of means, or to a mistaken judgment. Whatever is the cause, the result of failure is likely to be revolution.

Great changes never come without warning. Usually they are preceded by a long period of more or less hidden gestation before new movements can gather enough power to acquire the articulate expression that enables them to forge ahead. The world is only taken by surprise because it is always slow to recognize new leadership, prone to disparage novel ideas, and because no ruling class will ever welcome revolutionary changes that tend to upset some comfortable assumptions regarding the supposed stability of their order, the rights of property, and the sanctity of human life. The real pressure for revolution is therefore kept hidden below the surface until opportunity and the acquisition of sufficient strength makes the time ripe for action. Before this happens, although rumblings may be heard, they are usually underrated

and their significance is relegated to a reassuring background. Wishful thinking and warped judgment meet together to pull down many a curtain behind which impending changes can be prepared with greater freedom.

No special gifts of prophecy were needed to forecast the broad lines of future change after the last War. The Western world with half-knowledge saw in the Russian Revolution mainly evidence of the proselytizing spirit of international communism and failed to understand how much of Bolshevism sprang from deep roots embedded in the Russian soil. Long before Lenin's genius became apparent it was not hard to foretell that the incompetence and corruption which characterized Czarism had left a starved and exhausted people clamouring in despair for peace, and ready to welcome any change which would secure this. Illiteracy assisted this process by making the Russian people plastic enough to receive the stamp of great changes. An ignorant peasantry, long used to a ruthless exercise of authority, was to find that this could be still more drastic after the ferocity of Civil War. The only difference was that in the antinomy of good and evil that accompanied Bolshevism many Russians became aware for the first time that they too might hope to share in the benefits of the future.

Also in Germany, after the defeat of 1918, it was simple to foresee the craving for a new leadership that would rebuild the *Reich* from the ruins of disaster and once more flatter the national pride. The

drab Weimar Republic, sabotaged from within, had never fulfilled this yearning even when furtively it prepared for a future war. The revolution in Germany turned out to be a counter-revolution in spite of the democratic veneer that was laid over it in order to placate the victorious powers. The paramount aim of all German policy, whether carried out by Social Democrats, Clericals or Nationalists, was the resurrection of the greatness of the *Reich*. Former enemies expected this, nor did they find anything unreasonable in that aim. Their mistake lay in an unwillingness to recognize that the German idea of greatness was associated with military force, that German efforts were concentrated on reviving that force, and that the purposes which this resurrection had in view could only be attained by war. The last World War came to be regarded more and more in Germany as an interruption in the great march of Pan-German ideas which had developed with increasing momentum long before 1914. The Nazi records are rich in illustrations of how great changes introduced by command can be accepted by a nation for reasons that have nothing to do with their intrinsic merit. Hitler's ideas were old but his tactics were novel, and the junction of the two was to bring forth the monstrous measures that were to separate the Germans from Western civilization.

The Treaty of Versailles had facilitated the rise of Hitler in a very different way from the one commonly asserted. He gained some of his success not, as has been said, because of the harshness of its pro-

visions, for if these had been milder German aggression would have come sooner, but because the first consequence of defeat was to destroy or to weaken both the dynastic and the federal elements that until then had formed the top structure of the *Reich* and which if they had been preserved would have stood as an obstacle to the Nazi bid for power. Hitler found himself able to exploit a situation that was only indirectly connected with the vast changes which he later introduced. A deep racial feeling existed as a kind of undertone in German life. More than a century before a racial creed similar to the Nazi had been expounded by a gymnastic teacher named Jahn, and crushed by Metternich in the name of absolutism. Racial Pan-Germanism needed mass support for success, and the masses only began to be effectively organized toward the end of the nineteenth century. At that time the movement was held in check by Bismarck, who saw more advantage in having Austria as a faithful ally, which the pursuit of Pan-German policy would have made impossible, than in any fanciful dreams of racial expansion. When, in 1918, the two Empires collapsed, when Austria was reduced to a small German state, and princes forsook their thrones, these former obstacles to crude ambitions no longer stood in the way. The tall trees of the German forest had been cut, and a new and uncouth growth shot up unhindered from the soil.

A resentful and humiliated nation that had absolved itself of all blame for the causes of its defeat was certain to follow the first leader who could

inspire confidence in his pledge of victory. Missing only from this easy forecast of the future was the leader's name and the time for his appearance. Missing, too, was the realization in other countries of the implications that followed from his measures, or that Germans were quite so eager for conquest or quite so disposed to acquiesce in Hitler's savagery. The criminally distorted mind of the *Fuehrer* was to revolutionize the *Reich* by a series of vast changes which destroyed all previous standards.

The three totalitarian regimes of Bolshevism, Nazism and Fascism, so different in many respects, had as their common purpose the aim to weave into the national texture a number of drastic changes which were originally designed by small minorities. Fascists and Nazis, unlike the Bolsheviks, who first had to win a hard civil war, met with comparatively little real opposition from their divided opponents while putting through their extensive programmes. Each of these regimes tried to stabilize a disordered situation by establishing a supposedly permanent order of its own which was superimposed from above on the life of the nation. They did this by applying rigid and cruel compulsions to establish uniformity. In all three countries the rulers drew much of their strength from the deep wells of nationalism that were utilized to reinforce their authority. All three were aware that they would succeed or fail less because of the merits or evils of their rule than by their ability to stifle disaffection and to meet eventually the harder test of war.

Only a period of disordered ideas, such as always follows after a great defeat, when a previous order has been discredited, could have brought about the vast changes which had been originally planned underground by small groups of men who rose to the surface with sufficient authority to alter the habits of great nations. The violence of revolution, when it leaves behind it a normal existence, makes for sudden innovations; the more drastic these are the more drastic will be the methods needed for their enforcement. A new mechanical technique could now be applied to repression as well as to persuasion, and the processes of transformation were speeded in contrast with the more leisurely devices that had formerly been employed to secure the transmission of arbitrary power. The immense changes introduced were soon extended to every section of the population. They left the problem of human adjustment to be met by a new educational propaganda which was conducted on a similar gigantic scale.

Every fighting creed, whether its aim is religious, political or economic, or whether it is good or evil, has within it a proselytizing spirit which must make for victory or defeat. Usually such creeds gradually lose their fighting edge so that they cease to be dangerous. Mussolini, in his earlier and more cautious days, had been aware of the risk in going too far, and then announced that Fascism was not an article for export. But every aggressive form of proselytism must aim at bringing about acceptance, whether the result is obtained by conviction, opportunism or fear.

The effort of such a faith must be to try to uproot, or at least to keep down and to neutralize, any contrary forces or any elements that stand in the path of its success. This necessity is not always apparent, because, in the ordinary use of the word, proselytism has ceased to enter as an active force in religion, and usually confines itself to moderate and reasonable attempts to advance the cause of some particular doctrine without undue interference with others. Questions of religious creed have long ago ceased to inflame human passions, and in the liberal world of yesterday men had grown accustomed to seeing others of different faith live side by side in peace and amity. The Nazi faith, however, with its design of conquest, could not but revert to a former bigotry at the same time as it declared its own tenets forever unalterable. Hitler's goal of world domination left no alternative between leading the German nation to total victory or plunging it in total disaster.

The *Fuehrer's* choice was the result of excluding all possibility of peaceful change and left no room for any normal evolution that might take place through a compromise between different opinions. Changes that are imposed by ruthless violence will end in violence, an adage which is better expressed by the biblical words—'They that take the sword shall perish with the sword.' Defeated doctrines are apt to be quickly but not entirely forgotten before the reality of events, for new ideas that are adjusted to altered conditions will step into their place. Vanquished nations usually turn against their leaders

after these have driven them to ruin, just as in pagan times worshippers would insult and overthrow the false gods who could not give them victory. Ideology, like petrol in a car, is a combustible which serves only for a limited mileage, and Stalin has observed that Hitlers come and go but that Germany would remain. But in the process of elimination defeated ideas will not always disappear as fully as some may expect. Not infrequently a revival comes with another generation, yet it will hardly survive a second defeat. The Napoleonic idea that outlived Waterloo, really perished at Sedan, but the ghost of Napoleon still haunted British imaginations with unfortunate results, for after 1918, the fear of his spectre, even though unmentioned, was among the reasons that led to the rift between London and Paris, and aided the rise of Hitler. It may be many years before the ghost of the *Fuehrer* will be finally laid.

III. THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN HISTORICAL CHANGE

In times of grave danger measures of survival will be taken that are prompted by primitive instincts which then operate far more powerfully in determining the needs of the moment than any measures due to preconceived ideas. This explains the paradox of how Bolshevism and Democracy, after having tried in vain for years to destroy each other, suddenly