

The
DYNAMICS
of
WORLD HISTORY

by
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SECTION II: THE VISION OF THE HISTORIAN

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The Problem of Metahistory

METAHISTORY is a new word and one which is as yet unfamiliar to the ordinary reader, so that it is perhaps necessary to define what we mean by it before any discussion of its function and value. I take it that the term was coined on the analogy of Metaphysics which is itself by no means an easy word to define. When Aristotle had written his books on Physics, he proceeded to discuss the ultimate concepts that underlie his physical theories: the nature of matter, the nature of being and the cause of motion and change. In the same way Metahistory is concerned with the nature of history, the meaning of history and the cause and significance of historical change. The historian himself is primarily engaged in the study of the past. He does not ask himself why the past is different from the present or what is the meaning of history as a whole. What he wants to know is what actually happened at a particular time and place and what effect it had on the immediate future. The facts may be of little importance, but if they are true facts, they are important to him if he is a true historian. The historian studies the past for its own sake with a disinterested passion that is its own reward.

But if this is so, what difference is there between history and antiquarianism? I think the difference is less than is

generally supposed. For it was the great antiquaries of the seventeenth century—Ducange and Mabillon and the Maurists—who were the real founders of modern historical scholarship, and if we wish to find a typical example of the pure historian uncontaminated by any extraneous metahistorical or sociological elements, it is to these men that we should look. Nevertheless, one must admit that if history had been left to these pure historians, it would never have attained the position that it holds in the modern world. It was only when history entered into relations with philosophy and produced the new types of philosophic historians, like Montesquieu and Voltaire, Hume, Robertson and Gibbon, that it became one of the great formative elements in modern thought. This alliance endured throughout the nineteenth century. It was strongest in Germany where it assumed a new form under the influence of German philosophic idealism but it was also dominant elsewhere—in Russia and in Italy above all. In France it was sociology rather than metaphysics that had the greatest influence on the historians from Alexis de Tocqueville and Fustel de Coulanges to Elie Halévy in our own days, while in this country and in the United States the older eighteenth-century tradition of philosophic liberalism persisted throughout the nineteenth century and is not altogether extinct even today.

When modern historians like Mr. Alan Bullock pass a sweeping condemnation on metahistory (*History Today*, February 1951) and demand that it should be banished from the field of historical study, I do not think that they do justice to the part that metahistory has played in the modern historical development or fully realize how pervasive and how inevitable is its influence. For if an age has strong philosophic interests, it is surely inevitable that its philosophy will affect its study of history and that it will not only influence its attitude to history but will determine the choice of the subjects of historical study. If you believe in the theory of progress, for instance, you will see history as the story of progress and you will tend to study that aspect of progress which seems to you the most important, as Lord Acton studied the history of the idea of freedom. And if you are a good historian, as Acton was, your preconceived metahistorical idea will not destroy the value of the historical research which has been motivated by it.

But the influence of metahistory is not confined to periods

of philosophic activity. There is also a theological metahistory which plays a similar role in societies and periods dominated by religious faith. Even the great antiquary historians of whom I have spoken professed a theological metahistory of this kind, though it was so much taken for granted that it does not obtrude upon our attention. Nevertheless, a great historical scholar like Tillemont undoubtedly shared the same metahistorical preconceptions as Bossuet, and all his ponderous tomes were to him nothing more than a series of laborious footnotes inscribed at the foot of a page of divine revelation.

But if all historiography is so pervaded by metahistorical influences, what is the reason for the strong reaction against metahistory which is now so common among English academic historians and which was so well expressed in Mr. Alan Bullock's article? I think this is part of a wider change affecting every side of modern thought and which is philosophical rather than historical in origin. The great movement of philosophic idealism that dominated the nineteenth century has come to an end and consequently the idealist interpretations of history have become discredited. Historians today are in revolt against the metahistory of Hegel and Croce and Collingwood, not because it is metahistorical, but because they feel it to be the expression of a philosophical attitude that is no longer valid; just as the liberal historians of the eighteenth century revolted against the theological metahistory of the previous period. The effect of this great change on historical thought has been very fully discussed by Professor Renier in his remarkable book on *History: Its Purpose and Method*, published in 1950. But Professor Renier does not condemn metahistory as such. On the contrary, he argues that every historian has his philosophy of history, whether he recognizes it or not. Consequently his revolt against the idealist philosophies of history does not lead him to assert the independence of history against philosophy but rather to establish a new relation between history and the current non-idealist forms of philosophy as represented by the pragmatism of Professor Dewey and the logical positivism of Professor Ayer.

Mr. Alan Bullock, on the other hand, did not merely condemn the metahistory of the idealist, he wished to outlaw metahistory altogether. Above all his criticism was directed against all who attempt to find some kind of pattern in history,

whether they are sociologists or students of comparative culture like Spengler and Toynbee. These last two writers are often regarded as the typical modern representatives of metahistory. They are the bugbears of the academic historian and it is against them rather than against Collingwood and Croce that the main attack of the critics of metahistory has been directed. Nevertheless, the reasons for this hostility are not so simple as they seem at first sight. Certainly both Spengler and Toynbee are metahistorians and both of them have been deeply influenced by the tradition of philosophic idealism which is today under a cloud. But they are also historians of culture who have ventured beyond the study of a single culture and have embarked on the difficult task of the comparative study of cultures. Now it may be argued that this task exceeds the powers of the historian and that we do not yet possess adequate knowledge to make it possible. But if it is possible, and insofar as it is possible, it belongs to the domain of history rather than of metahistory. The "pure" historian maintains that it is not his business to form general propositions about civilizations as such, but only to trace the rise and fall of such civilizations as the Hellenic and Chinese. But how is he to do this, until he has discovered what a civilization is? And how can he discover this unless he has made some comparative study of other civilizations? It seems to me that Toynbee's initial discussion of the field of historical study and his definition of a civilization as an independent entity that constitutes an intelligible field of historical study are genuinely historical conceptions providing a valuable and necessary criterion for modern historical study. If the academic historians are to criticize his system, it should not be on account of its metahistorical character, but because he has attempted too much with insufficient material; because he has not been content to lay the foundations of a comparative study of culture, but has tried to construct a complete all-embracing system of world history at a single stroke. If this is a mistake, it is one which has been made often enough by historians in the past. Universal history is not metahistory; although it is hardly less unpopular with modern academic historians.

There remains, however, a further possible objection to Toynbee's method. Even if we accept the comparative study of cultures as a legitimate form of knowledge, we may still say that this is not history but sociology; and in Mr. Bullock's

view there is an essential difference between the function of the sociologist who is seeking for general laws governing human development and that of the historian who simply "wants to know what has happened." Though this distinction seems a reasonable one, it is one that is extremely difficult to maintain in practice. Mr. Bullock's definition of history, for example, is far too narrow to satisfy the historians themselves. As I have pointed out, French historiography has always had a strong sociological interest, and the best French historians are usually the most sociological. Mr. Bullock himself mentions Elie Halévy and Marc Bloch as representative historians, and I do not think there is anyone who would question this. Yet what is the first volume of Halévy's great *History of the English People* but a sociological study of English culture at the beginning of the nineteenth century? And the same is true of Marc Bloch's two volumes on *Feudal Society*.

Moreover, at the present time the rigid separation of sociology and history is being criticized from the side of the anthropologists. Dr. Evans-Pritchard, the Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford and the President of The Royal Anthropological Institute, has recently made a masterly survey of the whole problem in the Marett Lecture for 1950; he arrives at the conclusion that sociology is a kind of historiography, and though it is a special kind of historiography it differs from that of the historian in technique and emphasis and perspective but not in method or aim. "When a social anthropologist writes about a society developing in time, he writes a history book, different it is true, from the ordinary narrative and political history, but in all essentials the same as social history." He believes that the present tendency of anthropological studies is in the direction of history and that in the future it will tend to approximate to culture history rather than to model itself on the natural sciences as in the past. Thus Dr. Evans-Pritchard is far from regarding sociology as a kind of metahistory. Indeed, there is a striking resemblance between the attitude of the academic historians to the idealistic metahistory of the nineteenth-century philosophers and that of Professor Evans-Pritchard towards the positivist "meta-sociology" of the nineteenth-century anthropologists, which he condemns in just the same way as Mr. Bullock, when the latter criticizes the attempt "to annex history to a metaphysical system, or to turn it into a science on

that out-of-date nineteenth-century model on which the original expectation of the social sciences was founded."

Thus the problem of the relations between history and social anthropology is essentially different from that of their relations to metahistory, which is common to them both. The case of Toynbee is a difficult one because he is at the same time an historian, a sociologist of comparative culture and a metahistorian; his critics often go wrong by confusing his sociology of culture with his philosophy of history and treating both of them as equally metahistorical.

But Toynbee does not stand alone in this respect. Even more complex and more remarkable is the case of Tocqueville who is generally admitted by the academic historians to be one of the great historians of the nineteenth century. Yet Tocqueville is not only an historian and a sociologist; he is also a metahistorian, and his metahistory is religious as well as philosophical. He opens his greatest work by a bold profession of faith in the religious meaning of history and the religious vocation of the historian. "The whole book," he writes, "which is here offered to the public has been written under the impression of a kind of religious dread produced in the author's mind by the contemplation of the irresistible revolution that has advanced for centuries in spite of such amazing obstacles, and which is still proceeding in the midst of the ruins it has made. It is not necessary that God Himself should speak in order to disclose to us the unquestionable signs of His will; we can discern them in the habitual course of nature and in the invariable tendency of events." The modern reader may dismiss such utterances as mere conventional rhetoric. But if he does so he will be profoundly mistaken, for Tocqueville was expressing his deepest convictions. As he wrote to a friend, he regarded his work as "a holy task and one in which one must spare neither one's money nor one's time, nor one's life."

If the metahistorical approach is inconsistent with historical subjectivity, if, as Mr. Bullock writes, history will not "bear the weight of the systems of moral absolutism after which so many people hanker," then Tocqueville's preface to *Democracy in America* is enough to condemn his book from the start as morally pretentious and historically worthless. Yet, somehow he gets away with it, and his two great works still stand today as classical examples of the art of the historian. And he succeeds not in spite of his principles but

because of them. If we compare his work with that of his contemporaries who wrote good, straight narrative history like Mignet or Thiers, one must admit that Tocqueville is incomparably the greater historian; he is greater because he is more profound and his profundity is due to the breadth of his spiritual vision and to the strength of his religious faith.

The only conclusion that I can draw from this is that metahistory is not the enemy of true history but its guide and its friend, provided always that it is good metahistory. There were other historians of Tocqueville's generation who also conceived their task in metahistorical terms—for example, Michelet and Carlyle, but the metahistory of the one consists of superficial generalizations and that of the other is a bombastic and interminable sermonizing. Better an antiquary or an annalist than a minor historian who writes like a minor prophet. The academic historian is perfectly right in insisting on the importance of the techniques of historical criticism and research. But the mastery of these techniques will not produce great history, any more than a mastery of metrical technique will produce great poetry. For this something more is necessary—intuitive understanding, creative imagination, and finally a universal vision transcending the relative limitations of the particular field of historical study. The experience of the great historians such as Tocqueville and Ranke leads me to believe that a universal metahistorical vision of this kind, partaking more of the nature of religious contemplation than of scientific generalization, lies very close to the sources of their creative power.