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THE PLACE OF MODERN HISTORY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF KNOWLEDGE

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To define the position which the history of the last four hundred years occupies as an object of study, or to signalize its particular importance as a field of intellectual activity, requires a preliminary consideration of the place which history in general holds in the domain of human knowledge. And this consideration cannot be confined to purely political history. For political history is only an abstraction, — an abstraction which is useful and necessary both practically and theoretically, but is unable to serve as the basis of a philosophical theory. Political development in the chronicle of a society, or set of societies, is correlated with other developments which are not political; the concrete history of a society is the collective history of all its various activities, all the manifestations of its intellectual, emotional, and material life. We isolate these manifestations for the purpose of analysis, as the physiologist can concentrate his attention on a single organ apart from the rest of the body; but we must not forget that political history out of relation to the whole social development of which it is a part is not less unmeaning than the heart detached from the body.

The inevitable and perfectly justifiable habit of tracing political development by itself, and making political events chronological landmarks, led to an unfortunate restriction of the use of the word *history*, which, when used without qualification, is commonly taken to mean political history, and not history in the larger concrete sense which I have just defined. This ambiguity furnishes an explanation and excuse for the view that history is subservient to political science, and that the only or main value of historical study consists in its auxiliary services to the study of political science. This doctrine was propagated, for instance, by Seeley, and gained some adhesion in England. Now if we detach the growth of political institutions and the sequence of political events from all the other social phenomena, and call this abstraction history, then I think

Seeley's theory would have considerable justification. History, in such a sense, would have very little worth or meaning beyond its use as supplying material for the inductions of political science, the importance of which I should be the last to dispute. But if the political sequence is grasped as only one part of the larger development which constitutes history in the fuller sense, then it is clear that the study of political history has its sufficient title and justification by virtue of its relation to that larger development which includes it, and that it is not merely the handmaid of political science. Political science depends upon its data, and, in return, illuminates it; but does not confer its title-deeds.

But a larger and more formidable wave, threatening the liberty of history, has still to be encountered. It may be argued that the relation of dependence holds good, though it must be stated in a different and more scientific form. It may be said: Political science is a branch of social science, just as political history is a part of general history; and the object of studying general history is simply and solely to collect and furnish material for sociological science. Thus the former theory reappears, subsumed under a higher principle. The study of history generally is subordinate to sociology; and it follows that the study of political history especially is subordinate to that branch of sociology which we call political science. The difference, and it is a very important difference, is that, on this theory, political history is no longer isolated; its relations of coördination and interdependence with the other sides of social development would be recognized and emphasized. But the study of general history, including political, would be dependent on, and ancillary to, a study ulterior to itself.

Now this theory seems to run counter to an axiom which has been frequently enunciated and accepted as self-evident in recent times, namely, that history should be studied for its own sake. It is one of the remarkable ideas which first emerged explicitly into consciousness in the last century that the unique series of the phenomena of human development is worthy to be studied for itself, without any ulterior purpose, without any obligation to serve ethical or theological, or any practical ends. This principle of "history for its own sake" might be described as the motto or watchword of the great movement of historical research which has gone on increasing in volume and power since the beginning of the last century. But has this principle a theoretical justification, or is it only an expedient but indefensible fiction instinctively adopted? Is the postulate of "history for its own sake" simply a regulative idea which we find it convenient to accept because experience teaches us that independence is the only basis on which any study can be pursued satisfactorily and scientifically; and while we accord history this status, for reasons

of expedience, is it yet true that the ultimate and only value of the study lies in its potential services to another discipline, such as sociology?

It seems to me that our decision of this question must fall out according to the view we take of the relation of man's historical development to the whole of reality. We are brought face to face with a philosophical problem. Our apprehension of history and our reason for studying it must be ultimately determined by the view we entertain of the *moles et machina mundi* as a whole. Naturalism will imply a wholly different view from idealism. In considering the place of history in the kingdom of knowledge, it is thus impossible to avoid referring to the questions with which the so-called philosophy of history is concerned.

If human development can be entirely explained on the general lines of a system such as Saint-Simon's or Comte's or Spencer's, then I think we must conclude that the place of history, within the frame of such a system, is subordinate to sociology and anthropology. There is no separate or independent precinct in which she can preside supreme. But on an idealistic interpretation of knowledge, it is otherwise. History then assumes a different meaning from that of a higher zoölogy, and is not merely a continuation of the process of evolution in nature. If thought is not the result, but the presupposition, of the process of nature, it follows that history, in which thought is the characteristic and guiding force, belongs to a different order of ideas from the kingdom of nature and demands a different interpretation. Here the philosophy of history comes in. The very phrase is a flag over debated ground. It means the investigation of the rational principles which, it is assumed, are disclosed in the historical process due to the coöperation and interaction of human minds under terrestrial conditions. If the philosophy of history is not illusory, history means a disclosure of spiritual reality in the fullest way in which it is cognizable to us in these particular conditions. And, on the other hand, the possibility of an interpretation of history as a movement of reason, disclosing its nature in terrestrial circumstances, seems the only hypothesis on which the postulate of "history for its own sake" can be justified as valid.

This fundamental problem belongs to philosophy and lies outside the scope of discussion. All that can be done for the present occasion is to assume the validity of that kind of interpretation which is generally called the philosophy of history, and, starting with this postulate, to show the particular significance of modern history. Perhaps it may be said that such interpretation is quite a separate branch of speculation, distinct from history itself, and not necessarily the concern of an historical student. That is a view which should be dismissed, for it reduces history to a collection of annals. Facts

must be collected, and connected, before they can be interpreted; but I cannot imagine the slightest theoretical importance in a collection of facts or sequences of facts, unless they mean something in terms of reason, unless we can hope to determine their vital connection in the whole system of reality. This is the fundamental truth underlying Macaulay's rather drastic remark that "facts are the dross of history."

It is to be observed that the idea of history as a self-centred study for its own sake arose without any consciousness of further implications, without any overt reference to philosophical theory or the systematization of knowledge. It appeared as an axiom which at once recommended itself as part of the general revolutionary tendency of every branch of knowledge to emancipate itself from external control and manage its own concerns. While this idea was gaining ground, a large number of interpretations or "philosophies" of history were launched upon the world, from Germany, France, England, and elsewhere. They were nearly all constructed by philosophers, not by historians; they were consequently conditioned by the nature of the various philosophical systems from which they were generated; and they did a great deal to bring the general idea of a philosophy of history into discredit and create the suspicion that such an idea is illusory. I observe with interest that this Congress, in the Department of Philosophy, assigns a section to the Philosophy of Religion but not to the Philosophy of History. I feel, therefore, the less compunction, that my argument compels me to make some remarks about it here.

I need hardly remind you that the radical defect of all these philosophical reconstructions of history is that the framework is always made *a priori*, with the help of a superficial induction. The principles of development are superimposed upon the phenomena, instead of being given by the phenomena; and the authors of the schemes had no thorough or penetrative knowledge of the facts which they undertook to explain. Bossuet boldly built his theory of universal history on the hardly disguised axiom that mankind was created for the sake of the Church; but nearly all the speculative theories of historical development framed in the nineteenth century, though less crudely subjective, fall into the same kind of fallacy.

Two of the most notable attempts to trace the rational element in the general movement of humanity were those of Hegel and Krause. They are both splendid failures, Hegel's more manifestly so. They are both marked by an insufficient knowledge of facts and details, but in imposing his *a priori* framework Hegel is far more mercilessly Procrustean than Krause. It was the modern period which suffered most painfully through Hegel's attempt to screw his-

tory into his iron bed. His scheme implies that the modern period represents the completion of historical development, is part of the last act in the drama of the human spirit. This implication is preposterous. What we know about the future is that man has an indefinite time in front of him, and it is absurd to suppose that in the course of that time new phases of thought will not be realized, though it is quite impossible for us to predetermine them. This error alone is sufficient to cast suspicion on the whole edifice. For the stages of history, as a revelation of spirit, correspond *ex hypothesi* to the dialectical stages in the logical evolution of the idea; and if Hegel fixes the terminus of the historical evolution at a point immeasurably distant from the true term, it evidently follows that the correspondences which he has established for the preceding stages with stages in the logical evolution must be wholly or partly wrong, and his interpretation breaks down. The keys are in the wrong locks.

Krause's system, which has had considerable influence in Belgium, avoids the absurdity of not allowing for progress in the future, — a consideration which there was no excuse for ignoring, since it had been recognized and emphasized by Condorcet. He divides the whole of human history, including that which is yet to come, into three great periods, — the ages of unity, of variety, and of harmony, — and pronounces that mankind is now in the third and last stage of the second period. This theory, you perceive, has an advantage over Hegel's in that it gives the indefinite future something to do. But, although this Procrustes is more merciful, the Procrustean principle is the same; there is an *a priori* system into which human development has to be constrained. I am not concerned here to criticise the method on which Krause proceeds; I only want to illustrate by two notable examples, that of Hegel who ignores the future, and that of Krause who presumes to draw its horoscope, how the philosophy of history has moved on false lines, through the illusion that it could construct the development of reason in history from any other source than history itself. By the one example we are taught that, in attempting to interpret history, we must remember there is no such thing as finality within measurable distance:

His ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono;

while the other example warns us that in considering the past it is idle to seek to explain it by any synthesis involving speculations on the inscrutable content of the future.

It is, indeed, curious to note how the authors of the numerous attempts to present a philosophical construction of history, which appeared during the nineteenth century, assume, so naïvely, that their own interpretations are final, and that the ideas which are within the horizon of *their* minds are the ultimate ideas to be sighted,

by man, the last ports to be visited in his voyage down the stream of time. It is strange how this childish delusion, this spell of the present, has blinded the profoundest thinkers. Hegel thought that the final form of political constitution was something closely resembling the Prussian state, that the final religion is Christianity, that the final philosophy is his own. This was logical in his case, because it was part of his view that the plenitude of time has come; yet we can have very little doubt that this doctrine was prompted psychologically by what I have called the spell of the present. But even those who were able, in phrase at least, to transcend the present and look forward to indefinite progress, speak and argue nevertheless as if the ideas which are now accessible and within the range of our vision could never be transcended in the course of the progress which they admit. The absurdity of this view is illustrated by reflecting that the ideas with which these writers conjured — such as *humanity*, *liberty*, *progress*, in the pregnant meanings which those words now possess — were beyond men's horizon a few centuries before. We must face the fact that our syntheses and interpretations can have only a relative value, and that the still latent ideas which must emerge in the process of the further development of man will introduce new and higher controlling conceptions for the interpretation of the past.

I have pointed out the common error into which philosophies of history have fallen, through not perceiving that in order to lay bare the spiritual process which history represents, we must go to history itself without any *a priori* assumptions or predetermined systems. All that philosophy can do is to assure us that historical experience is a disclosure of the inner nature of spiritual reality. This disclosure is furnished by history and history alone. It follows that it is the historian and not the philosopher who must discover the diamond net; or the philosopher must become an historian if he would do so.

But not only is it necessary to abandon unreservedly the Procrustean principle; the method of approach must also be changed. This is the point to which it has been my particular object to lead up. The interpreter of the movement of history must proceed backward, not forward; he must *start from the modern period*. For a thorough, fully articulated knowledge of the phenomena is essential — not the superficial acquaintance with which speculators like Hegel worked; and such a knowledge is only attainable for the modern period, because here only are the requisite records preserved. Here only can one hope to surprise the secrets of the historical process and achieve a full analysis of the complex movement. The records of ancient and medieval history are starred with lacunae; we are ignorant of whole groups of phenomena, or have but a slight knowledge of other groups; and what we do know must often be seen in

false perspective and receive undue attention on account of the adjacent obscurities. We can survey and attempt syntheses; but syntheses without fully articulated knowledge are no more than vague shots in the direction of a dimly seen object. And the only syntheses possible in such conditions are insignificant generalities, bloodless abstract conceptions, like the *ἀμενηνὰ κάρηνα* of Homer's world of shades. The interpretation of history that shall be more than a collection of plausible labels must grasp the vital process, perceive the breath and motion, detect the undercurrents, trace the windings, discern the foreshadowings, see the ideas traveling underground, discover how the spiritual forces are poised and aimed, determine how the motives conspire and interact. And it is only for the history of the last three or four hundred years that we possess material for investigating this complicated process.

And it is for the development of the nineteenth century that our position in some respects is most favorable. It is commonly said that recent history cannot be profitably studied, on the ground that we are too near to the events to be able to treat them objectively and see them in the right perspective. Admitting the truth of the objection, recognizing fully that recent events are seen by us "foreshortened in the tract of time," we must nevertheless remember that there is a compensation in proximity which it is disastrous to ignore. For those who are near have opportunities of tracing the hidden moral and intellectual work of an age which subsequent generations cannot reach, because they are not in direct relation. De Tocqueville said: "What contemporaries know better than posterity is the mental movement, the general passions and feelings of the time, whereof they still feel the last shuddering motions (*les derniers frémissements*) in their minds or in their hearts." If this is so, it is one of the most pressing duties to posterity that men in each generation should devote themselves to the scientific study of recent history from this point of view.

We may go further, and declare that, in this light, modern history as a whole possesses a claim on us now, which does not belong either to antiquity or to the Middle Ages. We have ourselves passed so completely beyond the spiritual boundaries of the ancient and medieval worlds that we can hardly suppose that we possess any greater capacity for a sympathetic apprehension of them than our descendants will possess a thousand years hence. Whereas, on the other hand, we may fairly assume that we are in a much better position than such remote posterity for sympathetic appreciation of the movements — the emancipatory movements — of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. It therefore devolves upon us before we have drifted too far away to do what may be done to transmit to future generations the means of appreciating and com-

prehending. In this sense the study of what we call modern history is the most pressing of all.

But I have permitted myself to digress from the argument. I was concerned to show that our only chance of tracing the movement and grasping the principles of universal history is to start with the study of the modern age where our material is relatively full, and proceed regressively. One great mistake of those who have attempted philosophies of history has been that they began at the other end, — not at the beginning, but at whatever point their knowledge happened to reach back to, perhaps in China, perhaps in the Garden of Eden, — and were consequently obliged to adopt a difficult and precarious synthetic method. Precarious, because in passing on from one stage to another there is no guarantee, owing to our fragmentary material, that we have knowledge of all that is significant, and therefore the synthesis which expresses the transition to a higher stage may be vitiated by incompleteness. We may be acquainted only with some of the forces which determine the sequel, and, if we proceed as though we had all those forces in our hands, our conception of the sequel will be inadequate.

On the analytic method, on the contrary, we start from a definite terminus, namely the present, — contingent indeed, but not arbitrary, since it is the only possible limit for the given investigator, — and in the first stage we have all the material, so that it is the fault of the investigation and not the result of accident if the analysis is not exhaustive. The problem then is, having grasped the movement of the ideas and spiritual forces which have revealed themselves in the modern period, to trace, regressively, the processes out of which they evolved, with the help of our records. This, at least, is the ideal to which the interpreter would try to approximate. That, with fragmentary records, the whole historical movement can ever be traced by methods of inference, I do not indeed believe; but assuredly it is only in the period where the records exist that we can first detect the secret of the process or begin to discern the figure on the carpet.

But the question will be asked: Can we define absolutely the position of the modern period in the secular perspective of history? The field of what we call "modern history" has a roughly marked natural boundary at the point where it starts, towards the end of the fifteenth century. We may say this without any prejudice to the doctrine of continuity. But the phrase is used to cover all post-medieval history, and therefore the hither limit is always shifting. For while it is usual to mark off the last thirty or forty years as "contemporary history," as years pass on the beginning of "contemporary history" moves forward, and the end of the modern as distinguished from the contemporary period moves forward too. The

question arises whether this conventional nomenclature is any longer appropriate, whether all post-medieval history can be scientifically classified as a period, with the same right and meaning as the Middle Ages. "Ancient History" is of course a merely conventional and convenient, unscientific term; is this true of "Modern History" also? It may be thought that the answer is affirmative. It may seem probable that the changes which began at the end of the eighteenth century, the great movements of thought which have thrilled the nineteenth century, the implications of the far-reaching vistas of knowledge which have been opened, mark as new and striking a departure as any to which our records go back, and constitute a *Neu-zeit* in the fullest sense of the word; that in the nineteenth as in the sixteenth century man entered into a new domain of ideas; that of the nineteenth as much as of the sixteenth are we justified in saying

Ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo.

If so, our nomenclature should be altered. The three centuries after Columbus should be called by some other name, such as post-medieval, and "modern" should be appropriated to the period ushered in by the French Revolution and the formation of the American Commonwealth, until in turn a new period shall claim a name which can never be permanently attached. It would follow that in the Historical Department at this Congress, there should be another section; the nineteenth century, the more modern modern period, should have a section to itself. In Germany, a distinction of this kind has been adopted. The sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries are described as *die neuere Zeit;* while the nineteenth is distinguished as *die neueste Zeit.*

Among the notes which form the stamp and signature of this *neueste Zeit* is the new historical interest, if I may say so, which has become prevalent in the world and is itself an historical fact of supreme importance. It is expressed not only in the enormous amount of research that has been done, but in the axiom of "history for its own sake," and also in the attempts to create a philosophy of history. It is a new force set free, which will have its own place in the complex of the driving forces of the world. It is to be taken along with the equally recent development of a consciousness of our relations to future generations, which is practically reflected in a growing sense of duty to posterity. Both facts taken together, the interest in human experience and the interest in human destiny, represent a new sense of the solidarity of humanity, linking past ages and ages to come. In other words, the human mind has begun to rise above the immediate horizon of the circumstances and interests of the present generation, and to realize seriously, not as a mere object of learned curiosity, the significance of the past and the potentialities of the future.

The most familiar of words, *past* and *future*, have become pregnant with significance; they are charged with all the implications of a new perspective.

It is clear that this new sense is inconsistent with the affirmation of Arnold and Seeley that contemporary is superior to preceding history by all the superiority of an end to the means. This doctrine expresses the attitude of the old unregenerate spirit. The theoretical truth which it contains is simply this, that contemporary history represents a more advanced stage than any preceding it, or, in other words, there is a real evolution. But for the same reason it is itself inferior to the development which will succeed it; and if past history is to be described as a means, contemporary history must be equally described as a means, on the same ground. Theoretically, therefore, this teleological argument has no application; it would not become relevant till the end of the process has been reached. But what Arnold and Seeley probably had most in mind was the importance of comprehending the past for the sake of comprehending the present for practical purposes. (This is now so fully understood and recognized that I have not thought it necessary to dwell on it to-day. It is now generally acknowledged, by those whose opinion need be considered, that the practical value of history consists not, as used to be thought, in lessons and examples, but in the fact that it explains the present, and that without it the present, in which we have to act, would be incomprehensible. It is modern history, of course, that is here chiefly concerned. Lord Acton said: "Modern history touches us so nearly, it is so deep a question of life and death, that we are bound to find our own way through it, and to owe our insight to ourselves." I venture to think that Lord Acton, in this characteristic statement, rather strains the note; but the statement concerns, you observe, the practical not the theoretical value of the subject.)

To attempt to define absolutely the significance of modern or recent history in the order of development would be to fall into an error like that for which I criticised Hegel and Krause and others who thought to draw forth Leviathan with a hook. It is much if it can be established, as I think it can, that with the nineteenth century the curtain has risen on a new act in the drama. But we can be more confident in asserting negatives. The ideas and forces which have driven man through the last four hundred years and are driving him now, are not the last words or dooms in the progress of reason. The idea of freedom which the modern world has struggled to realize has been deemed by many the *ultima linea rerum;* but it is difficult to see how or why it should be final, in the sense of not being superseded by the appearance of higher ideas which its realization shall have enabled to emerge. Or again, it is unreasonable to suppose that the idea of nationality which has recently played and still plays a

great rôle, is an end in itself or more than a phase in evolution. We must acquiesce in our incompetence to form any scientific judgment as to the value or position of this stage in the total development.

To state briefly the main thesis of this paper. The answer to the question, "What is the position of modern history in the domain of universal knowledge?" depends in the first instance on our view of the fundamental philosophical question at issue between idealism and naturalism. If we are believers in naturalism, then all history, including modern history, has its sole theoretical value in the function of providing material for the investigation of sociological laws. It must accept a position such as Comte assigns to it. But if we are idealists, if we hold that thought is a presupposition of physical existence and not a function of matter, then history as a disclosure of the evolution of thought has an independent realm of its own and demands a distinct interpretation, to prepare for which is the aim of historical research. The segment of history which we call modern, from the sixteenth century onward, occupies a peculiar place, because here, partly in consequence of the invention of printing, our materials begin to be adequate for a complete analysis. This gives us the theoretical significance of the modern period as an object of study; it is the field in which we may hope to charm from human history the secret of its rational movement, detect its logic, and win a glimpse of a fragment of the pattern on a carpet, of which probably much the greater part is still unwoven.

This Congress is suggestive in many ways, suggestive especially of the distance the world has traveled since 1804 or since 1854. There will be many more of its kind; but this is unique as the first. It is not very bold to predict that historians of the distant future, in tracing the growth of coöperation and tendencies to a federation of human effort, which are one of the transformative influences now affecting mankind, will record this Congress in which we are here met together as a significant point in this particular stage of man's progress toward his unknown destiny.