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XXIV. Historical Meaning

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XXIV. Historical Meaning

Abstract

Philosophers and theologians have not been alone during the present age of crisis in trying to solve, or at least to illuminate, the riddle of human existence. In their attempts to find meaning for the life of man, they have been joined by many historians who are convinced that it is also an essential part of their task to discover some clue to whatever destiny might be in store for the human species. As a result, the past quarter of a century has seen the appearance of a host of books, pamphlets, and articles devoted to the subject of meaning in history. [excerpt]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

This is a part of [Section XXIV: Historical Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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XXIV. HISTORICAL MEANING

Philosophers and theologians have not been alone during the present age of crisis in trying to solve, or at least to illuminate, the riddle of human existence. In their attempts to find meaning for the life of man, they have been joined by many historians who are convinced that it is also an essential part of their task to discover some clue to whatever destiny might be in store for the human species. As a result, the past quarter of a century has seen the appearance of a host of books, pamphlets, and articles devoted to the subject of meaning in history.

Reduced to its simplest terms, the task of the historian in any age is to recount, on the basis of carefully gathered information and as artfully as he can, some aspect of the past. From history in its most inclusive sense, a series of events which have occurred, he constructs history in its more usual sense, which Carl Becker once defined as "the memory of things said and done." The historian may wish simply to preserve the recollection of some notable happenings. He may desire to bring the past to bear upon the present in the hope of understanding the present or influencing the future. He may want to instill patriotism or to prove a point. In any event, it is his ultimate concern with as much of the day-to-day life of man as he can recapitulate which helps to distinguish the historian from the social scientist, who is concerned primarily with the social creature man.

Does the task of the historian end when he has reported what he believes to be the facts? There are those who think that it does not, that it is his further responsibility to garner from the experience of the past everything possible of value either for the present or for the future. He discharges this responsibility by interpreting that experience to his fellowmen. Other writers have insisted that when the historian goes beyond the data of everyday experience and begins looking for generalizations or laws in history from which he hopes to derive some pattern, he ceases being a historian and becomes something else, a philosopher or a theologian. The historian works with facts, these writers argue, not (as did Hegel) with philosophical principles. And there are simply too many facts to be mastered to permit much in the way of accurate generalization.

This effort is more often perverted by non-historians than historians. Exmp - Art for art's sake. or Art for a purpose - the comm. product is national art.

Some writers have maintained, following Shakespeare, that if written history is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing, that is because there is nothing in the events themselves to impart meaning. Any pattern which the historian discerns, so this argument goes, is one which he, himself has imposed on a series of events which he has studied. In effect, this is to regard the meaning of history as being that there is no pattern or purpose in human temporal events. This may not be such a counsel of pessimism or despair as it first appears. It is possible to look at history as being little more than the record of human crimes and failures, and to find the real purpose of human existence in an eternal realm entirely apart from temporal events. In fact, some contemporary theologians and others have found this view a strong antidote to the once widely held belief which identified the will of God with such institutions as capitalism and democracy. To see this in its perspective, we might ask ourselves whether, had we lived in the Middle Ages, we would have (and also whether we should have) regarded manorialism and feudalism as divinely and permanently ordained institutions.

Before proceeding further into the knotty question of historical interpretation, we shall pause to review briefly some of the answers already put forth by Western man and his forbears. In spite of the writings of Herodotus and Thucydides, the Greeks were basically disinterested in developing much of a philosophy of history. The world for them was a natural cosmos, something essentially static, in which circular motion was regarded as perfect motion. In harmony with this, they believed that the pattern of history was cyclical. Progress and retrogression followed each other in a succession without beginning or end, without any unfolding pattern superimposed, and in a way which justified neither cosmic optimism nor pessimism. The great Greek thinkers turned to nature to find meaning, and left the province of history largely to those interested in the chronicling of events. The only possibly important use of history for the Greek lay in its predictive value. Since its pattern was cyclical, he believed that events altogether or nearly repeated themselves. One who had mastered the course of past events was in a good position to predict what was about to happen. The Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (161-180), said that by the time one was forty he had seen everything one will ever see of temporal events.

If to the Greek history had no purpose or goal, since it was going nowhere, much the reverse was true for the Hebrew. As far as the West is concerned, the concept of the historical may be said to have originated with him. The Hebrew believed that God had created and was preserving both the universe and the moral order in historic time, and that He had revealed Himself to a chosen people through Abraham and Moses. Furthermore, God had promised that if they obeyed His commands He would reward them and use them in fulfilling His purposes. This was an interpreta-

tion of history in strictly religious terms. It was also very narrow, since the unfolding of the divine plan was centered in one small people.

Whereas for the Greek history looked into the past, for the Hebrew it pointed confidently into the future, either to the appearance of a Messiah or to some cataclysmic event which would establish the Hebrew people once and for all in their promised station. History moved in an irreversible straight line. Its events were unique and nonrecurrent; there would never be another flood or another exodus, nor a new revelation. And it moved toward a definite goal and conclusion, upon the reaching of which God would make the meaning of history entirely clear. Thus the element of time was a significant and serious factor for the Hebrews, much more so than it has been for most of the world's religions. Finally, the Hebrews also believed that history was unpredictable. At least part of what happened to man depended on his actions in obeying or rejecting God's commands. Although the reward for disobedience was indeed forbidding, thus seeming to leave man but a Hobson's choice, here was a belief in human freedom in a sense unknown to the Greeks. It left one less than ever certain of the full meaning of history, since man always had a part of his fate in his own hands.

As we have already seen, the Christians inherited this Hebrew world-view and kept most of it. For them the Incarnation became the central event of history instead of the revelation to Abraham and Moses. It was Augustine who developed the Christian interpretation of history into a form which remained dominant in the West, though certainly not unchallenged, for well over a thousand years. In the City of God he attempted to explain the tension between human freedom on the one hand and divine purpose on the other which has characterized Christianity from its beginning. Augustine believed this tension would last until the day of judgment, when God would sum up history and, in a world beyond it, solve the riddle of human existence.

The first substantial attack on this Christian understanding of history came during the Enlightenment. It was Voltaire who coined the term "philosophy of history" to mark the difference between his own views and those which had preceded him. Voltaire called the written history of the past a pack of tricks played upon the dead, and regarded it as a record of superstition and priestly and noble tyranny. He and other philosophes who began rewriting the record wanted to expose the ignorance and folly of the past to the cold light of reason. But they were not in retreat from history. The great consummation for which they devoutly hoped was to occur in the here and now, in historic time; but it was to be effected by man's efforts, not by God's. As Carl Becker observed, the heavenly city of the philosophes was to be established on earth. Human perfection, both materially and morally, was to come through science, reason, and obedience to nature's

laws. The resulting idea of progress, ably expounded as we have seen by Condorcet, was in effect a secularized version of the Hebrew-Christian view of history.

In terms of its popularity and the significance men attached to it, the study of history reached new heights in the nineteenth century. Such thinkers as Hegel, Comte, and Marx sketched out broad, striking, and controversial interpretations of history which pictured man as moving inexorably toward some great terrestrial climax. Spencer, as we have seen, went so far as to elevate progress to the category of a law of history. Romanticism, conservatism, and nationalism each in its own way gave an impetus to the study of the past, as did the rise of democracy and its concomitant, public education. While the Industrial Revolution fostered varied attitudes, its upsetting influences turned many men to the past for some guide in seeking an adjustment to them. Darwinism, by suggesting that the changes in nature and man were both slow and gradual, was a powerful force in encouraging the cultivation of an historical frame of mind in order to understand where man was, how he had arrived, and what likely directions lay open to him. Both liberals and conservatives, socialists and capitalists appealed to history for justification of their particular theories.

These factors were matched by developments within the field of history itself. During the nineteenth century many sources of information became readily available to the scholar for the first time. Records and indices were published, sometimes with public funds. Archeology, anthropology, and philology began presenting him with the evidences for a greatly improved account of pre-literary and early literary times. He now not only knew more about Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem; but also his vision was widened to include earlier advanced cultures hitherto almost entirely unremembered. And his vision began catching more facets of human society than the political which had long dominated written history. History became a separate branch of study in European and American colleges and universities. Its study and teaching became a recognized and organized profession. By 1900 a flood of writings had begun, revising old concepts or perhaps destroying them altogether. The day was at hand when the problem would be how to digest too much evidence rather than how to piece together too little. The flood continues. Never before has Western man had so much written history at his beck and call. As he tends increasingly to associate his destiny entirely with the historical process, we can expect the output to grow accordingly.

Those who professed to be writing "scientific history" in the later nineteenth century claimed that they had used all the sources which they could find, painstakingly and critically -- in a word, objectively -- to determine the facts. Then they had rigorously allowed the facts to speak for themselves. Their task, they said, was simply to tell the story as it actually happened, for its own sake, and with as few literary embellishments as possible.

The great French writer, Fustel de Coulanges (1830-1889), once proclaimed: "It is not I who speak, but history which speaks through me." Any philosophy which might be implicit in his facts, he insisted, "must be permitted to emerge naturally, of its own accord." Many "scientific historians," with their faith in science as the transformer of society, were confident that the facts which they had gathered and presented only confirmed the idea of progress.

To be sure, the nineteenth century enthusiasm for history was not unanimous. In the United States, for example, it was less popular than in Europe. Henry Ford said that history was "bunk." Pragmatism, which was primarily an American phenomenon, was much more interested in the present than in the past. Then too, there have always been those who are opposed to historicism as a waste of time. They have believed that historians become so obsessed with the past that they make its study an end in itself. Anyway, they do not think that the problems of the present can be solved by reference to the past.

As we have seen, many challenges have been hurled at the liberal and optimistic Western world-view of the nineteenth century, ranging from the New Physics and Freud to two world wars and severe economic dislocation. These challenges have forced serious thinkers to review and revise their estimate of Western Civilization and of man in general. The three selections which follow represent only a sampling of the results of these reflections.