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Alfred Cobban

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## CHAPTER I

## THE PRESENT STATE OF HISTORY

THE historian who is called upon to deliver the Wiles Lectures is invited not so much to write the history of his chosen period or subject as to reflect upon it. There are possibly still some who will regard such reflection as an historical perversion, if not the original historical sin, and regret the days of supposed innocence when the historian could gaze on all his works and find them good, before the serpent of ideological doubt had entered his paradise and tempted him to speculate on his own presuppositions and those of other historians. Some perhaps still look back nostalgically—though they might not put it in this way—to that fairy-tale world when all the historian had to do was to release the facts from their enchanted sleep in archive or record, blow off the dust, and waving his pen, like the wand of a fairy in a Maeterlinck play, bid them speak for themselves. ‘It is not I who write,’ declared Fustel de Coulanges in a well-known phrase, ‘but history which writes through me.’ So doubtless the professor in *Lucky Jim* believed when he lifted his telephone and intoned ‘History speaking’.

That happy time, if it ever existed, is over. It is now a platitude that history is made—of course not arbitrarily—by historians, and changes when they change and as their

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world changes. The process has often been a slow one and not easily perceptible, but there have also been periods of rapid change in the writing of history. I believe that the present may be such a period. When Taine came to London, one of the things he did was to stand, in the morning, before the gates of a great London railway terminus, when it was releasing the flood of what were not yet called commuters from the suburbs, in order, he said, to gain an impression of the collective businessman's face. The editor of an historical journal, exposed to the mass impact of the torrent of historical works that pours in on him, may have a similar illusion, and be tempted to draw from his experience conclusions as superficial as those that Taine did. For example, he might conclude that one condition for an historian's success today is to *have no footnotes*—otherwise he will never become a star of television or the Sunday papers, or a beneficiary of the book clubs. But it would be a mistake to take this as an inherent characteristic of the contemporary development of history. Rather it is a simple consequence of the pressures of commercialisation.

A more significant feature of current trends in historical writing is the appearance of an increasing number of books *about* history, and the tendency, even in historical text-books or monographs, to devote more space to historiographical discussion than would have been allowed until quite recently. This, I believe, reflects a growing awareness of the contribution of the historian himself, his personality and his ideas, to the history that he writes. It means that the Croce-Collingwood paradox that all history is contemporary history—not in any

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abstruse philosophical sense, but in the plain, straightforward sense that it is all part of contemporary thought — has now become a platitude. Before it comes to be so completely accepted that it is taken for granted, and the fact that any different view was ever possible is forgotten, it will be worth while reminding ourselves that the view of the historian's activity that was generally assumed in the past generation was very different. Naturally, since it was mostly a naïve, un-selfquestioning activity, we cannot look to historians themselves for a description of what they were doing. An admirable account has been provided, however, by Professor Michael Oakeshott, in his lecture 'The activity of being an historian'.<sup>1</sup> I have discussed this in another lecture in the same series<sup>2</sup> and will therefore treat it quite briefly here. Professor Oakeshott finds three major attributes in historical activity, and his analysis is undoubtedly true of history as it was generally understood during the inter-war years. First, the historian is interested in past events for their own sake and independent of any subsequent or present events.<sup>3</sup> (To believe this, all he needs is rather more than the normal capacity for self-deception.) Secondly, he must not enquire into origins or discuss causes, because this would be to read history backwards.<sup>4</sup> (A reaction, perhaps, against taking Edwards' notes on the causes of the Wars of the Roses seriously.) Indeed, the idea of historical causation is a difficult one, and has not been made easier by the recent efforts of philosophers to explain it. One can sympathise

<sup>1</sup> *Historical Studies*, I, ed. T. Desmond Williams (1958), pp. 1–19.

<sup>2</sup> *Historical Studies*, III, ed. James Hogan (1961), pp. 1–8.

<sup>3</sup> *Historical Studies*, I, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

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with Professor Oakeshott's desire to discard it altogether. Moreover, he is only reflecting the natural and justifiable tendency in historical research when he tells us, 'The relation *between* events is always other events, and it is established in history by a full relation *of* the events.'<sup>1</sup> (Such a full relation would however require omniscience to know and eternity to narrate.) Thirdly, and this also reflects orthodox historical opinion though it is put in a paradoxical form, we must not impose present sense on past nonsense.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that history is a tale told by an idiot—but all the same it is an idiotic tale. The historian's god is chance. Cleopatra's nose, the Duchess of Marlborough's gloves, the Holy Roman Emperor's mushrooms, Hitler sending a dispatch a day later than he should have sent it—these are the true stuff of history. And the task of the historian is to accumulate more and more of such facts and put them in chronological order. His not to reason why; indeed, he must not reason at all. His world is an academic Garden of Eden, a nudist's paradise of naked facts, in which he may sport, innocent not only of the ideas of good and evil (as Professor Oakeshott and others have told us, the historian must conscientiously avoid moral judgements), but innocent of any ideas at all.

Of course, it must be recognised that not all historians have been able to live up to this austere ideal. Bury found himself tempted to ask what was the use of the accumulation of statistics, the publication of trivial records, the labour expended on minute criticism. Rapidly putting

<sup>1</sup> M. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (1933), p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Historical Studies*, I, pp. 18–19.

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temptation behind him, he replied, 'That is not so much our business as the business of future generations. We are heaping up material and arranging it, according to the best methods we know. . . . Our work is to be used by future ages.'<sup>1</sup> This was weak: he should frankly have admitted that it was not to be used at all. Other distinguished historians have also betrayed their feeling that something might be wrong with the kind of history which Sir Maurice Powicke described as 'a pedantic chase after the insignificant'<sup>2</sup> and Marc Bloch as '*le goût de l'infiniment petit*'.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Mr Barraclough has gone much farther. He has told us, 'We must seek for history an end outside itself, as it had, for example, when it was viewed as a manifestation of God's providence.'<sup>4</sup> This is a noble aspiration but hardly one that the historian can meet. What it calls for is a St Augustine or a Bossuet. The best the present century has been able to provide in this line is Professor Toynbee. His monumental *Study of History* is an interpretation of the course of human life and the destiny of man: it may be a philosophy of history, it is not history and we should not expect historians to provide us with a philosophy or a substitute religion.

This does not mean that we have to accept the picture of history as a simple collection of events 'organically related by successiveness, by sequence in time', to quote Sir George Clark in his introduction to the *New*

<sup>1</sup> J. B. Bury, *An Inaugural Lecture* (1903), pp. 31-2.

<sup>2</sup> F. M. Powicke, 'The Collection and Criticism of Original Texts' (1931), in *Modern Historians and the Study of History* (1955), p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Bloch, *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française*, II, ed. R. Dauvergne (1956), p. xvii.

<sup>4</sup> G. Barraclough, *History in a Changing World* (1955), p. 29.

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*Cambridge Modern History*.<sup>1</sup> Whatever historians may have said, or believed, no historian has ever written a history which is a simple relation of successive events. Professor Oakeshott is right: to ask for pure narrative is to ask for pure nonsense. Amid a multitude of recorded facts, some principle of selection, conscious or unconscious, is inevitable, and this principle must be an idea of some kind. Historians who imagined that they were free from the infection of ideas were those whose presuppositions were so deeply rooted as to be below the level of consciousness; they were taken for granted, assumed to be part of the nature of things and were therefore not susceptible to rational criticism. The greater English historians—Stubbs, Maitland, Acton, to mention only a few—illuminated their history with a conscious and rational set of values. Some of these were inherited by their successors; but as they ceased to be rationally and consciously held they became stereotypes that were taken for granted, unconscious presuppositions, and the historians who inherited them thought in all innocence that they were free from the infection of ideas.

This was an illusion. All history involves the selection of facts and their arrangement in more than a temporal order. Even the editing of an original document is an act of discrimination, and thus a judgement reflecting the interests and values of the historian. If this is so, it is better that we should recognise it. To know that there are theoretical assumptions behind the history we write is not to reduce history to the expression of a theory, but to

<sup>1</sup> *New Cambridge Modern History*, 1 (1957), General Introduction, p. xxi.

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take a necessary step to its emancipation from the *a priori* and towards really critical history.

Of course, not all topics or periods are equally subject to the influence of theoretical presuppositions, even if the history of none can be totally immune from it. This book has to discuss a phase in the history of Europe—the French Revolution—which, perhaps more than any other, has had its history written in ideological terms.<sup>1</sup> And this fact is of broad historiographical significance, for the revolution is the strategic centre of modern history. Its interpretation is crucial both for the understanding of the age of social change which preceded it and of the period—now nearly two centuries—of revolution which has followed. This is my justification for beginning with a brief discussion of the ideological problem of revolutionary history.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. my *Historians and the Causes of the French Revolution* (1958).

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## CHAPTER II

## HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY

THE established theory of the French Revolution, put forward in a broad sense at the time by the actors in the revolutionary drama, expanded into a general historical theory by the historians of the French Restoration, and taken for granted in most of the work that has since been done on the history of the revolution, is put in clear and concise language by one of the greatest of French historians of this century. 'The revolution', writes Georges Lefebvre, 'is only the crown of a long economic and social evolution which has made the bourgeoisie the mistress of the world.'<sup>1</sup> M. Albert Soboul, in an excellent *précis* of the history of the revolution, repeats Lefebvre's formula in almost the same words. He makes it more explicit, however, when he adds that though this idea was first proclaimed clearly by the bourgeois historians of the Restoration, they failed to see the essential fact. This was 'that the revolution is explained in the last analysis by a contradiction between the relations of production and the character of the productive forces'.<sup>2</sup> With such views we seem to be at the opposite extreme from that represented by those historians who tried, if unavailingly, to take the meaning out of history. Lefebvre

<sup>1</sup> G. Lefebvre, *Études sur la Révolution française* (1954), p. 246.

<sup>2</sup> A. Soboul, *Précis d'histoire de la Révolution française* (1962), p. 8.



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and M. Soboul seem to be putting almost too much meaning back into it, when they reduce the greatest happening in modern history to the deterministic operation of an historical law.

Being an historical law, though it was first detected by historians of the French Revolution, it had to be capable of application to the interpretation of other revolutions. Thus, the Russian historian, Porchnev, among others, has seen the troubles in seventeenth-century France in terms of a feudal society under attack from the people; while the English civil war also has been widely interpreted as a bourgeois revolt against feudalism. After a period when such views had the authority of almost unchallengeable orthodoxy, they have come recently under serious criticism as an attempt to force historical evidence within the strait-jacket of a pre-conceived theory. 'Porchnev', writes Professor Mousnier, 'was determined at all costs to bring correct facts, justly observed and appreciated relationships, within the limits of a Marxist theory that the material itself exploded.'<sup>1</sup> In the historiography of the English civil war the explosion has already occurred, and it has blown up the supposed bourgeois revolution, leaving aristocracy and gentry, royal officials, lawyers, merchants, people, rising and falling classes, feudal and bourgeois society, landowners and peasants, scattered in fragments about monographs and text-books.

Some eight or nine years ago I suggested that the same process of disintegration was likely to take place in the history of the French Revolution, and that the inter-

<sup>1</sup> R. Mousnier, 'Recherches sur les soulèvements populaires en France avant la Fronde', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, v (1958), p. 83.

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pretation of the revolution in terms of the overthrow of feudalism by the bourgeoisie, always rather meaningless, was becoming increasingly incompatible with the results of modern research.<sup>1</sup> This suggestion, although it was based in part on the results of Lefebvre's own researches, met with his criticism.<sup>2</sup> The suggestion that the theory of the revolution as the overthrow of feudalism by the bourgeoisie was a myth, he took to be equivalent to a denial of the whole actuality of the revolution. At the same time, he agreed that, in a different and Sorelian sense, it was indeed a myth. 'The convocation of the États généraux', he wrote, 'was a "bonne nouvelle": it proclaimed the birth of a new society in conformity with justice, in which life would be better.'<sup>3</sup> A Dutch historian has subsequently observed, not I feel unjustly, that in this defence of the traditional view of the revolution the great French historian went some way towards justifying a different criticism, that of Professor Talmon,<sup>4</sup> by identifying the revolution with the kind of political Messianism for which Talmon condemned it.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the orthodox theory of the revolution has now assumed some

<sup>1</sup> *The Myth of the French Revolution* (1955), pp. 8 ff.

<sup>2</sup> G. Lefebvre, 'Le mythe de la Révolution française', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 145 (1956), pp. 337-45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345.

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952).

<sup>5</sup> B. W. Schaper, 'Robespierre opnieuw bekeken balaus van een bicentenaire', *Tidschrift voor Geschiedenis* (1960), p. 23. H. Calvet warned that under the influence of abstract sociological theories history would become 'une sorte de mythologie où les dieux nouveaux, maîtres absolus du sort des hommes et de leurs actions, s'appelleraient esprit de classe ou mouvement des prix'. 'Sur l'histoire de la Révolution française', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* (1954), p. 305.