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THE USES OF HISTORY ?

I WOULD LIKE TO COMMENT ON some of the facts and on some of the myths involved in certain common beliefs in the uses of history. My comments will be irreverent since they are meant to challenge established orthodoxies. I shall not qualify my remarks as much as I should, but I hope it will be understood that when I speak of "the historian" I do not mean all historians without exception, and when I mention the "uses" or "utility" of history I refer to generally applicable, problem-solving strategies, and not to the aesthetic satisfaction or the mental stimulus an individual reader may derive from reading a history book.

The case of the absent-minded historian. A fact worth bearing in mind is that the historian is not concerned with the utility of his work while he is doing it, though when he comes to publish it, he (or his publisher, or his blurb writer) will sometimes tell us that the work serves to illuminate present problems. "The seventeenth century was an age of crisis", runs the typical publishing formula for histories of that century, "and today when we are also facing crises, it is important to know how another age grappled with its problems." That may be so. But what I want to point out is that the professional historian does not write his story with that thought in mind. First of all, his choice of subject matter will not be specifically determined by the problems that agitate us today. He will make it because the course of his interests or of his academic career has led him to it; because he thinks other historians have not yet dealt with it or have dealt with it wrongly; because he has access to particular documents; because he happens to have the linguistic or other technical skills a particular subject requires and he wishes to utilize them. Some of the most famous histories have been written for one or the other of those reasons, and it is no use pretending that historians worry about the applicability of their story to present problems when they set out to write it. (Popular historians may think about applicability before they choose a subject; but that is often the applicability to the market: Civil War histories in centennial years or mediaeval tales when

there is an upswing of interest in religion or romance. Precedent-minded historians, who write about the Lincoln-Douglas debates in election years or about the Monroe doctrine in times of Cuban crises, are similarly, if more seriously, motivated.) Secondly, the historian does not decide what to put in or what to leave out by thinking about what might be useful to the reader. In writing, say, a biography of some tyrant of the past, he may of course pay particular attention to aspects of the tyrant's behaviour which older historians ignored, but which readers who witnessed the era of Hitler and Stalin might find particularly interesting. On the other hand, I have never known an historian to omit a detailed description of the goose quill because people nowadays use pens and typewriters, or to spare us the details of a long-forgotten, unsuccessful dynastic struggle in a country that no longer exists because he knows that constitutional struggles in which his readers might be concerned no longer involve the fetish of hereditary descent. Thirdly, and this is perhaps the most important point, the historian organizes his materials to yield the most plausible and readable account of his subject. He does not marshal the facts he has collected with an eye on general rules which might be applicable to other times. The historian is not a writer of manuals or books of guidance; the facts are ordered to explain what happened in one particular case, perhaps two or three, but not what will happen tomorrow.

There are two conclusions that we can draw from this unconcerned behaviour of the ordinary professional, as distinct from the philosophical, historian. (1) He may be convinced that, if he has learned anything from his craft, he has learned that history records change, and that analogies are bound to be superficial or misleading for that very reason. The story he tells is unique in its important respects, and vaguely similar to other stories, past, present, and future, in respect to commonplaces only (people who fight must use arms, all revolutions imply overthrow of constituted authority, oppressive rulers are unpopular, and the like). He may see the whole point of his endeavour to record the changes, both obvious and subtle, wrought by the passage of time—and to leave it to those ignorant of history to think that, for example, "liberty", though the same word, is the same thing to a seventeenth-century colonist and a twentieth-century Ghanian. (2) Or, the historian may think that the drawing of instructive analogies between past, present, and future is legitimate, but that it is not his business to organize his story around that possibility. For the knowledge, however true, that similar events may take place elsewhere adds nothing to the history of the event he is describing, how it took place and what specific circumstances and people were involved in it—however valuable such

knowledge may be to those who study such events in general (sociologists or political scientists, for example).

This second conclusion raises an important point. If it is not the historian's job—and his behaviour would indicate that it is not—to arrange historical data in some logical or scientific order so that their legitimate application to other circumstances can be determined, we cannot strictly speak of the uses of *history*. We had better speak of the uses of *sociology*, *social psychology*, *demography*, *economics*, *political science*, and the like, for it is those social sciences (as well as Marxism) that attempt the job of converting historical data from their chronological into a logical arrangement. Consider the analogous case of the history of science. However interesting and informative a history of the bubonic plague may be, if we want to know how to prevent epidemics we go to the epidemiologist or other medical scientist, but not to the historian of medicine. (At least I would.) In short, history as history—as distinct from history as data utilized by social and natural scientists in the formulation of rules of general applicability—is a package without directions for use. The historian's absent-mindedness about the uses of history is not accidental. A story about a particular society may have a moral, which we may draw as we wish; but it cannot specify the conditions under which it is or is not valid to apply this moral to the problems of any other society, our own included.

A myth for children. That the situation is otherwise, that directions for use are built into the stories of the past, that simply by reading or studying history we can become doctors of society, has been a persistent myth. It is possible to document the origins of that myth very easily. In the period before history had become a professional pursuit, roughly from the Renaissance to the middle of the eighteenth century, many books about the use of the study of history were published—at one time there seemed to be more books of that kind than actual histories. These books were written by scholars concerned to justify two things: history, unlike other studies, could easily be pursued by any layman; nevertheless, its purpose was not frivolous or dangerous to morals since it provided instruction rather than mere enjoyment. The books all upheld the same theory of history, the classical theory. This went somewhat as follows. History is the moral philosophy for the ordinary man. It consists of examples of the virtuous and wicked, wise and foolish actions committed in the past. These examples teach readers, by enticing to imitation or avoidance, how to succeed in life. Statesmen are taught how to rule, generals to win battles, and private citizens to succeed, simply by reading of the failures and successes of the great. In addition, these books contained concrete examples—conventional examples and therefore always the same ones—of famous men who

had actually benefited from reading history. By our standards, these examples appear of course naïve, especially the favourite example of the Roman civilian who by reading history books on the journey to the battlefield became a victorious general or that of the king who was pronounced incurably ill by physicians but recovered miraculously after reading a biography of Alexander the Great. But it was not until the end of the eighteenth century, when history moved seriously into the hands of professionals who separated fact from fiction, that the exemplar theory of history was dismissed as unverifiable rubbish, or at best, was allowed to be an educational device for setting virtuous examples before children. As Hegel wrote in his *Philosophy of History*, early in the nineteenth century,

It may be allowed that examples of virtue elevate the soul and are applicable in the moral instruction of children. . . . But the destinies of peoples and states . . . present quite another field. Rulers, statesmen, nations, are wont to be emphatically commended to the teaching which experience offers in history. But what experience and history teach is this—that people and governments never learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.

Myth, pseudo-science, and science. Since that time, the myth has been perpetuated by those who have felt the same need as their predecessors did to justify history. Often, the same reasons are given: history, the layman is told, subserves ends more important than those of mere enjoyment or disinterested curiosity. But the terms of the argument have been changed slightly, since it is no longer possible to get people to believe that Scipio defeated Carthage merely because he carried the histories of Xenophon in his pocket. The new line has been not that history actually helped people to face problems, but that it might do so. It might do so if the assumption on which the new line is based turns out to be true. And that assumption is that, since the phenomena studied by natural science have been found to obey laws, the events studied by historians can also be studied as phenomena moving in obedience to law-like regularities of some kind. In short, history is a science, or at least can be studied as a science, like physics or biology. People who believe this have usually taken one of two positions. There is the "hard" position, popularized by Spengler, Toynbee, and other philosophic historians, which purports to describe an ineluctable historical law governing the decline and fall of past societies, in obedience to which we too shall soon meet our doom. (The usefulness of this information is not quite clear, since we can do nothing to intercept the operation of this law; as Toynbee once said, only a miracle might yet save us.) Considerably "softer" is the position which holds that a scientific study of history will reveal causes opera-

tive in history which are attended by deleterious consequences—the invariable regularity by which revolutions end up in dictatorship, for example. By identifying these causes and doing something about them, we can avoid the effects.

The hard position rests on a deterministic concept of law taken over from nineteenth-century natural science, but since no respectable natural scientist today believes in it any more, I can see little reason for giving the borrower credit for what the lender has withdrawn. Those who feel strongly about the possible effects of believing in this historical determinism have labelled it pseudo-history based on pseudo-science.

The soft position, that there are certain regularities and that a knowledge of them might enable us to manipulate our problems successfully, must lead, if it is soberly handled, to the position of the social scientist. As I have said already, I do not consider this to come under the heading of the uses of history. Up to now at least, historical data have played a much smaller role in the social scientist's investigations and problem-solving suggestions than have data based on contemporary surveys and case studies. Also, the theories by which the social scientist orders his findings are not historical theories, but rest on anything from mathematics to psychology; it is precisely this fact that has enabled the social scientist to step outside the circle of the myth, the myth that history as history teaches applicable lessons. It was only in the infancy of social science, about a century ago, that historical data were interpreted not with the aid of non-historical theories, but with historical theories—that is, with chronological sequences of the past blown up into the dimensions of a general law. Survivors from that period are not taken seriously by professional social scientists.

The liberal-arts axiom. Finally, there remains quite a different defence of the utility of history. This position avoids the fallacies that I have been criticizing here: it neither denies that historians study history simply for its own sake, nor chatters about historical laws. It is essentially the argument of the classroom, the professor speaking to the student. In an earlier age it maintained that knowledge of anything, but particularly self-knowledge, was impossible without knowing the classics; today it maintains that history is the *conditio sine qua non*. How, it is asked, can you understand the problems of your own or some other society, let alone know how to deal with them, unless you know their history? How indeed can you know yourself without knowing history?

These questions have undeniable force, at least insofar as they are supported by the proposition that the knowledge of man under all sorts and conditions of his existence is always useful. But the claim that a knowledge of history is a necessary

condition for an understanding of the problems of the present must be severely limited. There are some problems where a knowledge of other disciplines is likely to be more useful and the knowledge of history less so. For example, the sciences of nutrition and anthropology would be more relevant to an understanding of many of the problems facing underdeveloped countries than a knowledge of the past history of these areas. Past happenings, while they impinge in varying degree on the political history, if any, of those societies, will not necessarily tell us anything important about maintaining economic relations with or within these societies or about their tribal structure or agriculture. As to analogies between present underdeveloped or newly national societies and those of other times, these may well be misleading. The basic technological and political factors that dominate the world today have not merely changed some circumstances for which allowance can be made; they have altered the picture radically (and when the space age is upon us, the picture will be radically altered again). The attempt to understand the impact of cold-war nuclear strategies, let alone predict its effect, by reading about the impact of the British musket on the French-Indian or the Ashanti wars looks like a waste of time. There are some problems at least that do not yet have a history.

The question whether self-knowledge is possible without a knowledge of history also seems to have much force. But again there are limitations. A psychoanalyst unversed in history may know a great deal more about the capacities of the human mind in a variety of situations than the historian who knows nothing of the mechanisms, but much of the manifestations, of that same mind. Besides, a great many of the truisms which history teaches us about ourselves can also be come by in other ways. It is at least arguable that an intelligent perusal of one's daily newspaper will tell one as much as a history book about man's chronic liability to bigotry, prejudice, and violence—without, incidentally, misleading us, as history sometimes does, into thinking that the capacities for folly which we read about were those of other people and other times and not our own.

If the objections that I have urged against belief in the utility of history have any force, this may well be so because behind them lies yet another. In a large measure, historical knowledge as put together in the narratives we read is not objective knowledge, but objective knowledge reconstructed in the mind of the historian—a succession of interpretations and selective encounters with a carnival of source materials about which there is little immutable or definite. It is perhaps for that reason also that history will never serve as a sure guide to anything. But that is as it should be. Were the arguments by which the uses of history are justified to prevail, were history regarded as an indispensable tool for some purpose, instead

of being left alone to satisfy the demands of curiosity or the dictates of the imagination, our culture might well be the poorer for it. You cannot gain at the swings without losing something at the roundabouts. For every historical Rand Corporation, you might lose a Gibbon, who, as someone has once pointed out, would never have been eligible for a research grant from our historical utility companies, the Foundations. To safeguard against cultural impoverishment we must not confuse the legitimate task of history with the equally legitimate task of the social sciences. To argue that history is or could be some kind of science of society is to surrender a kingdom for a horse which someone else is riding.

However, I do not believe that these arguments will prevail. The attempt over many centuries to discover the uses of history has resembled, not the search for scientific knowledge, but the search for the philosopher's stone. But since my own position prevents me from using the evidence of the past to forecast what is to come, I must admit that I am a little worried.

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