

REMAKING HISTORY: A STUDENT ASSIGNMENT

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IT used to be the practice—I do not know whether it is still done to-day—for certain medical professors in hospitals, when a death occurred among the patients and the case was especially interesting, to assemble their student doctors and say to them: "You know the illness of which the patient died. We did our best but we could not save him. It was too late. The disease had been developing for several years. We know from his record approximately what he had done, or had not done, in the matter of treatment and general habits before coming here. Now! I want you to tell me how you would have proceeded if you had had him as a patient, say, five years ago—when the illness could already be diagnosed, but when there was still time to act. You, over there, tell us what you would have done."

The idea behind this method was clear. The professor wanted first of all to remind his students that a doctor must never accept results as inevitable. Even after the event, it is mental laziness to regard it with retrospective fatalism. For it not to have happened, perhaps all that was needed was a little more insight, or skill, or boldness, or a stricter watch on the patient.

But the discussion that then began among the students, guided by their teacher, was certainly an excellent opportunity to exercise both their critical sense and their professional imagination, as it provoked their various reactions. I am convinced that a doctor who had had this training would continue to benefit by it and would later say to himself more than once, when confronted with a difficult case: "It shall not be said that I could not discover here and now what a group of students, in discussion with their professor, would easily find out five years from now."

It is indeed regrettable that the professional training of statesmen—insofar as any exists—has nothing analogous to this. I should like to see every group of students in political science given a problem of this kind from time to time by their professor: "If, in the year 1800, you had had the destiny of France in your hands, if, for instance, you had been First Consul in Bonaparte's place, and your aim, limited and reasonable,

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had been to consolidate the gains of the Revolution by overcoming the hostility of the other countries and reassuring England, what would you have done? What continued policy would you have adopted?" Or this one: "Imagine yourself in 1910, with the task of saving Europe. Consider in turn the national viewpoints of France, England, Germany and Russia. Try to find a solution that would reconcile as far as possible these varied or opposed interests, and that would be lasting enough to avoid war for a long time." Or, finally: "Go back to the Europe of 1930. Do not underestimate the difficulties and dangers of all kinds with which it was beset, in the political, economic, social and even ideological fields. But try, even so, to find out whether certain solutions could not have spared the whole world a new catastrophe."

You will tell me that such criticism in retrospect *is* found here and there. Perhaps. But very rarely is it done with a completely free mind and with no mental reservation of personal apology. It is either old statesmen claiming that their ideas should have been followed or factions seeking only to expose the blunders of other factions; or finally, in the case of more distant eras, historians who go as far as to emphasize the errors of past leaders but who would fear the ridicule if they were to add plainly, with all the necessary details: "Here is what Bonaparte . . . or Louis XIV . . . should have done."

And yet only this constructive criticism and this courage in accepting responsibilities, even though they are imaginary ones, have any instructive value. It is too easy to say, "So and so was wrong; they acted foolishly." It is also necessary to prove that there was a way to do better. It is the searching for that proof that, together with the objections it would raise and have to solve, would be of the greatest intellectual benefit in the training of a future statesman. It would tend to develop in him two virtues that are seldom found co-existing: realistic prudence and boldness of imagination.

Of course, this research might meet the most discouraging objection of all: "In the situation under study, no serious and sincere arrangement could be envisaged, for the very good reason that at least one of the parties was not interested in reconciliation and intended to resort to violence when the moment seemed ripe."

But would it not be at least some result to cast doubt upon a maxim that we are too ready to abuse and that might be stated thus: "When a situation in the past has led to a catas-

trophe it is because the conflicting interests were irreconcilable, because the difficulties were basically insoluble?" Is it not a step forward when we can say: "I beg your pardon! In the case we are considering the reconciliation of opposed interests and the solution of the difficulties were never seriously sought, because one of the parties refused from the beginning, being ill-willed and untrustworthy." That is when the constructive phase of the work shows its true value and its eloquence as a lesson.

If, for example, by means of a thorough discussion, you show that in 1930 *none* of the difficulties of Europe and the world was insoluble, you may provoke a good number of those who were responsible at the time, but you will also provide the governmental and political specialists with new arguments, both to use against themselves in combating their own timid imaginations, and to use against their adversaries. You will also give the whole thinking body of humanity a useful theme to reflect upon. "It certainly seems," people will say to themselves, "that the Europe of 1930 was really not the prey of inescapable fatalities. There was a way for her to re-establish the normal currents of industry and monetary and financial stability, to reduce unemployment, to insure a more or less fair and advantageous distribution of raw materials and foreign products. Since the fatalities that they tell us caused the catastrophe are almost all based on these various factors it was only a question of pseudo-fatalities. The rest was a matter of good will and good faith. And no matter how poor the solutions had been, they would have been a thousand times better for all concerned than the terrible upheaval that was unleashed instead."

If public opinion, if humanity, could be led to reason thus, it would begin to see present problems in an entirely different light. To those who are already insisting: "It is beyond solving . . . We are faced with a fatal antagonism that cannot end in anything but another catastrophe," humanity would be more inclined to answer: "Yes, we know that old song. We must find a better one."