

## HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE MORAL LESSONS

History is implied in the object, the same as in researches; it is that which partly creates it. The choice of the questions that arise à propos of long historical periods is neither fortuitous nor chaotic. One can discern tendencies that explain themselves on both the historical and sociological planes. In formulating his questions the historian adopts a point of view having itself a certain historic dimension. The different methodologies on the subject of the relative value attributable to such and such a type of problem do not only anticipate numerous aspects assumed by the historical processes of the past. They depend equally on the way in which history and the historian are wedged into contemporary life. The problems of history, the questions themselves that arise constitute a fragment of the history that makes them. History depends then on the future; on the specific correlations established between the present, the contemporary

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historical reality and the functions that history assumes at the moment, on the one hand, and the knowledge of the past, on the other hand. Historical knowledge is tied then in a thousand ways to anxieties, to conflicts, to antinomies, and to searches in its own epoch, the present in the name of which is enquired into the past. Without being uniquely, as Huizinga said, the means by which the present takes account of the past it is meanwhile in a certain measure. Historic knowledge possesses a certain degree of expressive character: it explains the present in which it is born and in which it participates. Thus the historian is not the impartial and immutable observer of a past and of a present that dominates it. The problems of his period and his personal reactions to them cannot disappear suddenly from his sight from the moment he leans over the archives. The fact of being a historian does not go back only to adopting a certain methodological attitude, it means also taking a certain social and existential position. On assuming cognitive functions the historian does not only take part in "pure knowledge", he takes part equally, by virtue of his social milieu, his family and profession, etc., in the historic conscience of his period. Certain aspects of his position are fundamentally equivocal: the influence exercised on him by the culture of his special epoch reveal to him and hide from him in their turn the finished cultures living always more or less as "strangers." The historian must maintain his identity as an expert who thinks in terms of categories allowed by the culture of his epoch, and which identifies itself at the same time with the past culture and thus to the modes of thought and action of the men who are participating. He tries then, in the first place, to keep the distances between the past and the present, and in the second place, to share in both periods.

In particular, the historian finds himself in a difficult position, should he interpret the past in terms of criticising the causality, or as an appreciation, resting on that responsibility? The limit is very vague and imprecise which he must not pass if he is to define the causality of the crimes of the past in giving his moral judgment; he lifts from this fact all responsibility and he risks leaving certain essential aspects of the historical progress—the different possibilities which are offered to men in the past and the choice which they made. Also vague, imprecise, and heavy

with antinomy is the limit which the historian holds in relation to the recent past, chronologically completed, but which lives into the present, sociologically speaking. By virtue of his existence every fact must be considered as one of the ineluctable elements on the chain of cause and effect. But how could it be admitted that the historian had recourse to such arguments to explain that which is not morally neutral—the concentration camps, and the political crimes? From what discriminatory principle can he appeal to morale to judge the contemporary crimes, and presently the causality of past crimes?

In relating the past the historian must remain in the perspective of the present which he sees, and of the place occupied at the moment in the history of evolution. But the “present” is never finished. And as it is precisely in it that certain tendencies manifest themselves in evolution, the present offers equally, by reason of the same synchronic characters, all types of possibilities, an infinity of choice and of surprises, of divergent and convergent tendencies and of coagulated processes or innovators. Under its two-fold aspect it appears rather like the moment of an inevitable event, like the inevitable result of causes that have determined it. On this diachronic plan the possibilities that have followed realization are the only ones that signify. The speculations of “what might have happened,” on that which could have been the past if the possibilities had not been squandered, do not claim any more either verification or falsification. The task of the historian is not to describe the events that might have happened, but to explain the causes for which the events unrolled, of the manner of which they are the precise products. It is very difficult for a historian to reconcile the diachronic and synchronic aspects of the past, chiefly when—as often happens—he must surrender to the operations of rationalization *ex post* that inevitably imply the description of that which is “really over.” But each event which is really opened up closes equally in its structure all the gamut of choices—how difficult to determine—among all that “might have happened.” From certain aspects each present is less rich than the past that preceded it, because it has only realised some of the possibilities, having eliminated all the others. (As Max Scheler said, the past is always our debtor). But for certain other aspects the present is

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richer than the past because it was realised what was only possibility and has opened up new potentialities. It must be pointed out equally that in the moment when he endeavours to practise a synthesis of these two aspects, diachronic and synchronic, the historian participates personally to a certain present—which is not indifferent to this synthesis. What is more, the way in which the historian apprehends his present has, equally, a dimension applicable to the future, inseparable from his social, cultural, prospective etc.

Some of the reflections here are sufficient to show how the expression and the rationalisation of the historical perception of a given period is incarnate in the pattern of the objective historian who keeps himself aloof from his period. The origins and the consequences of the ideological deformations inherent in this design have served as a field of investigation for historians and sociologists. The historian must then cure himself of the illusion that he can attain an understanding and perfect perception of the principles and of the values intervening when he surrenders to his researches. Psychology, with Freud, sociology, with Marx, the one and the other deny him the possibility. To preserve his illusions the historian must, in effect, admit that his social and cognitive situation allows him plainly to recognize the premises and the consequences of his personal participation in the historical progress in which he finds himself placed. In consequence he must admit that the methods in which he participates, and which besides—beyond him—are *en train* to be established, are realized, and that he is capable of apprehending the meaning. But the contemporary conscience is precisely free from a vision of the evolution of history implying the existence of a historic sense already accomplished, of an innate sense of a kind, and given to men who participate. Thus Dilthey underlined it, the humanist value of this historicism proceeds from the fact that it liberates the vision that man has made of his past, of all the absolutes manifest or hidden that determine the “logic” and the meaning of history.

(Examination of the fluctuations to which the historiography and the philosophy of Marxist history has been submitted during the early decades of this century is most instructive in the understanding of this function of historicism).

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In what measure has the refutation of the methodological premises of the classic pattern of objective history swept away the refutation of the moral code of the historian of which one has already spoken? One might think that this code was tied so strongly to these principles that it would be carried along with these last. One could believe that no moral code is reconcilable with the principles of the relativity of knowledge, with the idea that the seeker is inevitably partial and runs the risk of deformations and ideological sublimations. Also, is the historic methodological thought *au pair* with the idea that history and the historian go through a specific moral crisis? In other respects this sentiment is always alive, as witness the actual studies that attribute the crisis of intellectual and moral confidence of our contemporaries *vis à vis* the history and the disturbance of the pattern proposed by the 19th century, patterns that rested upon the objectivity and the *univocité* as much as on the historic knowledge of the social and moral situation of the historian.

It would be difficult to establish the justice of a diagnosis, also general, on the debate on the decline of confidence in the moral value of history. Besides it is not certain that this phenomenon really exists (because how otherwise to explain the astonishing success of classic historic works published in different editions as “pocket editions” or “paperbacks?”) and really we do not know either the width or social dynamism. But even so we accept this diagnosis, it is certainly not the transformation of the historical method that is to blame in the first resort. The attitudes of men in relation to history are one of those variable elements of the structure of historical consciousness. It is easy to find numerous examples showing that the manner in which we live influences our attitude to history. The new generation—who know that the researches of the German scholars led to the possibility of the use of the atomic bomb by Hitler during the last war—regard with distrust all efforts at rational explanation to demonstrate the inevitability of past events. It knows also that for too long history has assumed the function of “*magistra vitae*” in the social conscience not to awaken the mistrust in that respect in this epoch; in effect, the disproportion on the

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one hand, the anonymous “destiny,” the decisions on the existence and the future of humanity, on the other, the possibility of individual action is today such that the history of the past appears useless for the rationalization of the present. The attitude *vis à vis* historical knowledge is equally influenced by the fact that this is verified by a material too easily manipulated, easy to exploit for purposes of power and propaganda, in order to sanction changeable values that are often contradictory. The historian-humanist has too often been reduced to the role of technician-propagandist.

The contemporary historian has lost his illusions; he does not believe any more that, like God, he is outside time, a participant in eternity but not in present events. He must be conscious of the fact that written history participates in the complex processes of reactualization and desactualization of different aspects of the past, resting on the consciousness of the epoch to which the historian belongs.

Written history did not only satisfy cognitive needs, but a larger need: it participates in “living history,” in the processes—here we print an expression dear to Madame N. Assorodobraj—of the apprehension of the past by the present. The questions that the historian formulates in regard to the past are as a rule general, inseparable from the questions that he poses in regard to his own period. It is in this sense that the historian, losing all his illusions, has given himself freedom but has also taken risks with the liberty of choice and the responsibility—that are the corollaries of freedom. Sharing in the disquiet and the hesitations of his time he participates in its future, not only because he brings knowledge to it, but also because he adds integrity. The contemporary historian has no more illusions as to his capacity for edifying history, and the possibility of replying that it has—in his quality of “*magistra vitae*” to the question “how can one live?” On the contrary historic knowledge and meditation on history can contribute to the clearing of moral problems of which the solution devolves on men who participate in the future of their special period. History does not transfer moral responsibility to an anonymous account, it must reveal the historical aspect of the options and the solutions, as much for individuals as for communities, and to contribute to

forming the consciousness of man's responsibility is to operate a choice of their actual future. History participates in the creation of values; it defines the imagination and the horizon of man.

The historicist philosophers and antipositivists at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries sometimes rejected the unchangeableness of man considered as a subject of historic process. Detaching it—in their role as antipositivists—from all natural conditions they reduced it to a moral and cultural subject. They considered as essential traits of culture themselves, the individual diversity, tendency to auto-affirmation by perpetual change. Natural sciences today that participate in a confrontation of cultures on a scale almost unknown, seem disposed on the contrary to correct exaggerations and to search in different cultures for cultures that are stable and unchanging, on a different plane: those of human personality, of systems of signs, of natural and corporate dimensions of human life. And by that to deepen the consciousness of pluralism, of the significance and the values realized by historical progress.

The fact that one has reconstructed the past in various ways, having the same epistemological value (different world constructions with all the fact accessible remain coherent, fruitful for future research, etc.) does not reduce the value of history as much as science. The interference with values in historic knowledge makes this phenomenon possible, and perhaps even necessary. It is also the plurality of the possible visions of the past that manifests the plurality of the historical significancies. Since we live in the world—said Merleau-Ponty—we are condemned to that which the world has, a plurality of meaning, because the historian does not uncover in the future a meaning that would at the same time be an ultimate judgment and the end. No version of the absolute—either epistemological or moral—comes true in historical progress. But to affirm the absurdity of the future does not imply that one must consider history as having no absolute end, and to deny the possibility of realizing the absolute in the human future doesn't imply more than that it is necessary to deny all significance of the living human effort to make the process of history more rational, to maximise in the future the possibility of rational decisions and the chances of their accomplishment. It is exactly in the

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historical process that the historical effort manifests itself; the actions motivated by the ends and the absolute values formed in a multiple sense, open to the meanings that contemporary and future generations add. Certainly there are moments when the historical process, where the plurality and the diversity of meanings converge and assume the form of an alternative: the future shows itself to each individual as an inevitable necessity of a definitive personal choice. But it is in these same moments that human activity gives rise to irriducible multiple values.

The work of the historian, his reconstruction of the past, has no more a unique and definitive meaning. He seeks the truth, but his work lasts in the historical future, that continues its particular life, manifests its hidden ambiguities and enriches the meaning and the import that were at first unforeseeable. In his search for the truth the historian cannot surmount the social limitations, the conflicts of values and the dilemmas of the collective conscience in which he participates: of his period, of his social class, of his ethnic or his scientific group etc. To be conscious of the fact of this participation is not enough to pass its limitations, and, on the other hand, it does not diminish anything of the personal and moral responsibility of the historian in his search for truth. The historical dimension of thought and of human activity does not show in the effort to relate the ends and the values, but in the effort to explain the problems and the experiences of an era by report of the values and the universal categories and intemporals. In the course of his special research the historian constantly elaborates a set of values that are, for him as a historian, morally obligatory. His work remains open to several interpretations and must be complete—and at the same time twisted—later; it carries the relativity itself. As for the historian, he cannot place himself in the relative: he can't do it, in his research for the "partial" choice between the true and the false. To be conscious of the relativity of the truth does not signify that one has the moral right to sanction the false. The consciousness of the relativity of values, of their variability in time, changes nothing of the absolute moral character of the act accomplished in historical research. The moral responsibility of the historian is total and no one can discharge it. The



historian must explore the past to arrive at *the* truth; he is morally obliged to choose and has no right to falsify.

The moral code associated by the 19th century with the “classic model” of history and the historian is established as insufficient to resolve the moral doubts and professional challenges by the methodological situation and the social functions of the history of our day. However, it seems that this code has given proof of considerable autonomy by comparison with this pattern. I think I can risk the proposition that, in our day, the general method of historical research allows the setting up of a system of moral norms, or moral and professional, which, certainly based on other principles, is a development of the classic code without having the illusions (this does not signify that it is itself totally devoid of illusions). This system of moral norms is enriched by the fact that the historian has taken profound notice of the methodological and sociological ambiguities in their proper place. Nevertheless, the consciousness of the relative character of written history implies nothing that can be written arbitrarily. The historian knows that the facts are not given to him, but that he participates in their formation and the values intervening in the choice of the problems and the questions, but he must not conclude that he has the right to manipulate these facts in the exercise of his *métier* without the minimum moral check. The only legitimate conclusion for him is to understand his responsibilities in the choice of the problems and the necessity of a rational self-control on the questions posed, as much as from the point of view of their cognitive usefulness as from their moral and social function. To understand that it is impossible to arrive at a total conscience and that it is not exempt from distortion, from premises and unconscious values—does not imply the given up of every effort at rationalization, but on the contrary, it postulates a maximum effort. To recognise that history can be reduced to mythology and deception, especially if the historians are not *bona fide* ones, and in their desire to serve the truth (or better still because of that), leads to making much more imperative the necessity for a control as rigorous as possible against the danger of self-deception, created by the historian in the same course of events. The social fact that, technically, the researches of contemporary science depend

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on centres with the necessary material at their disposal, and of course the political and economic centres, involves the necessity of a sensibility regarding the unconscious formation of conformist attitudes. The culture in which the historian participates always limits—under certain conditions—the possibilities of understanding the cultures of the past; the perception of this fact must strengthen the cognitive motivations and morals of the historian, who uses it to reduce the influence of his own limitations, and to open, as much as possible, other values than his own.

The lists of these moral postulates could be, obviously, much longer, but that will not prevent him being exposed to the reproach that such rules turn out always to be insufficient to make the choice in situations of conflict: in general a similar code, but if it is accepted on principle, it is never respected in fact. But it is the same for the majority of moral rules. Their acceptance allows of unity, if only provisional, of the cognitive effort and moral dignity, but it is not sufficient to allow of choices in conflicting and basically equivocal situations. If, however, the historian breaks the rules he exposes himself to a bad conscience, and to feeling that he has repudiated and betrayed his moral duty and the social role that he had assumed.