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THE POLITICAL INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY*

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Ever since the inquisitive age in which Voltaire wrote his *Philosophic Dictionary*, reflection upon the course of human events has caused scholars to persist in the search for a rational interpretation of history. They have not been discouraged by the skepticism of historians who, like Froude, have argued that the address of history must be less to the understanding than to the higher emotions. "A science of history," according to this historian, "implies that the relation between cause and effect holds in human things as completely as in all others; that the origin of human actions is not to be looked for in mysterious properties of the mind, but in influences which are palpable and ponderable." Froude believed that "natural causes are liable to be set aside and neutralized by what is called volition," and that in consequence "the word Science is out of place" in connection with the study of history. If, as Froude intimated, the origin of human actions can be found only in mysterious properties of the mind, the outlook for a rational interpretation of history may well be poor.

Despite the skeptics, political scientists, I think, will prefer to believe with Kant that "whatever metaphysical theory may be formed regarding the freedom of the will, it holds equally true that the manifestations of the will in human actions are determined, like all other external events, by universal natural laws." Hence, as Kant persuasively argues in his epoch-making essay, *The Natural Principle of the Political Order*, it may be hoped that, when the play of the human will is examined on the great scale of universal history, a regular march will be discovered in its movements.

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Thus, as Kant himself pointed out, marriages, births, and deaths appear to be incapable of being reduced to any rule by which their numbers may be calculated beforehand, on account of the great influence which the free will of man exercises upon them; and yet the vital statistics of all countries prove that these events take place according to constant natural laws. He compared them with the very inconstant changes of the weather, which cannot be determined beforehand in detail, but which maintain the flow of rivers, the growth of plants, and the existence of the animal world. Men, viewed as a whole, are not guided in their efforts merely by instinct, like the lower animals; nor do they proceed in their actions, like the citizens of a purely rational world, according to a preconcerted plan. Nevertheless, Kant concluded, it may be possible to discover a universal purpose of nature in this paradoxical behavior of human beings. We may not choose to speak of a science of history, but we may hope to collect with the aid of the historians the materials by means of which the history of creatures who act without a conscious plan of their own can be rationally interpreted according to a determinate plan of nature.

Kant did not believe that he himself knew enough about the history of mankind to explain the laws of human development, but he did venture to offer a clue to such an explanation. This clue is embodied in the famous eighth proposition of his essay on *The Natural Principle of the Political Order*. "The history of the human race," he declared, "viewed as a whole, may be regarded as the realization of a hidden plan of nature, to bring about a perfect political constitution as the only state in which all the capacities implanted by her in mankind can be fully developed." This is the great hypothesis which gives Kant his transcendent position among those who have sought a rational interpretation of history. It calls for an interpretation of history in terms of a constitutional history of mankind. Since the essence of every kind of constitution is the system of education which gives the constitutional forms their vital force and practical significance, a constitutional history of mankind becomes a history of the growth of the political ideas and ideals which animate the constitutions. Kant's formula for a rational interpretation of history, therefore, calls for the systematic and purposeful study of political ideas as reflected in political structures and processes. Such an interpretation may be termed for convenience a political interpretation of history.

Of all the political interpretations of history which have been inspired by the Kantian hypothesis, the most important is that of Hegel. The Hegelian conception of the history of mankind as a record of the gradual broadening and deepening of the idea of liberty is the grandest in the history of political philosophy. But Hegel's idea of liberty was conditioned by the circumstances and the temper of his time. With one eye doubtless on the fundamental verities, but with the other on the king of Prussia, he reached a conclusion which was better suited to gratify the pride of patriotic Germans than to satisfy the needs of dispassionate political thinkers. The resulting discredit of the Hegelian interpretation of history tended to depress the value of the Kantian hypothesis itself.

We Americans, without devoting much attention to philosophical interpretations of history, have always cherished our faith in the independent power of political ideas and ideals. The democratic-republican creed, if I may so describe the traditional principles of American politics, emphasizes the importance of securing the blessings of liberty. But we reject the Hegelian idea of liberty as too narrow and too negative. We doubt if there can be any satisfactory definition of liberty except in terms of some more positive concept. The idea of liberty seems to us to be closely associated with that of justice. We prefer to define it as the absence of political restraints upon personal behavior except those imposed by just laws. We identify justice with the interest of the whole body of people. We believe that a reasoned and settled determination to establish justice, and thereby also to secure the blessings of liberty, has been one of the active forces in building the American Commonwealth. For democratic-republican Americans, therefore, it is not difficult to believe further that a philosophical attempt to work out the universal history of the world with the aid of the clue furnished by Kant may eventually succeed in giving it a rational meaning in terms of a gradual broadening and deepening of mankind's natural sense of justice. Abroad, however, doubt on the part of professional students of politics that an acceptable interpretation of history could be achieved by the method of Hegel helped to clear the way for the favorite theory of a large part of the contemporary world, the economic interpretation of history.

The most recent statement of the economic interpretation of history comes from the skillful pen of the leading political theorist of the British Labor party, Harold J. Laski. No advocate of the

Marxist political philosophy can be expected to make out a better case than Professor Laski in his latest two volumes, *The State in Theory and Practice*, and *The Rise of European Liberalism*. Laski is not unmindful of criticism which has been directed against the Marxist philosophy of history. He is much too intelligent to argue that the selfish desire for personal gain on the part of members of governments affords an adequate clue to public policy, or even that the use of power is always governed by the private advantage of the economic class which dominates the state. He admits that statesmen may be sincere in their belief that they employ the authority of the state for the highest ends they know. He contends merely that what the rulers of the state can know and desire is conditioned by the economic relationships which the state, he thinks, exists in order to maintain; that these relationships give birth to an appropriate body of ideals; and that these ideals possess political validity because of their supposed power, as Laski puts it, "to maximize the possibilities of production." History, he concedes, is meaningless when read as nothing but a struggle between conflicting selfish interests. So to regard it, he insists, "is to defame the quality of human nature." History, he believes, is rather the record of the competition of ideals for survival, the character of which is determined by their power to exploit productive possibilities in the existing economic order. In other words, the latest and most refined version of the economic interpretation of history clothes the naked facts of the class struggle in the splendid raiment of triumphant ideals. These ideals remain, nevertheless, nothing more than rationalizations of economic interests.

A preliminary answer to such an interpretation of history is to match it against another which offers a conflicting interpretation of the same phenomena. For this purpose, Pareto's psychological interpretation of history comes conveniently to hand. Instead of rationalizations, Pareto offers us residues and derivations. The terms are not inconvenient, though hardly self-explanatory. Derivations, according to Pareto, are the ideas and ideals which may be advanced by those concerned to explain and justify their behavior. Political ideas and ideals, he concedes, may spring from attempts to justify rational interests in the economic order. They are more likely, he argues, to spring from attempts to justify the persistent feelings and sentiments which, when manifested as political behavior, he pedantically calls residues. Upon these residues and deri-

vations Pareto relies as heavily in developing his philosophy of history as Laski upon his rationalizations. The Liberalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, began, according to Laski, as a method of emancipating the rising capitalist class, and changed after 1789 into a method of disciplining the modern industrial proletariat. According to Pareto, this same Liberalism may have been merely an ingenious device for aiding the natural leaders of a changing world to win the new struggle for power and then to hold their gains. From this point of view, Laski's capitalists and proletarians are but the specific modern forms of the élite and the masses, into which, according to Pareto, mankind is universally divided.

It is not necessary for the advocate of a political interpretation of history to argue that both Laski and Pareto are wrong. Indeed it may be conceded that each has grasped a portion of the truth concerning the interpretation of history. But if each is partly right, neither is likely to be wholly right. Whether rationalizations or derivations are the more important factors in modern politics is a matter concerning which much can be said. The fascist triumphs and communist humiliations in recent years suggest that the derivations have been more potent than the rationalizations. Even the greatest of the communist triumphs, the successful establishment of the Soviet Union, a devotee of Pareto's interpretation of history would probably say, was a vindication rather of the Paretian than of the Marxist technique. Be that as it may, it is clear that communist as well as fascist leaders can exploit the residues of the mob. They too can qualify for places among the élite in lands where the masses seem to be far from ready for a genuine dictatorship of the proletariat. Pareto's *Mind and Society* is not only a practical working manual for demagogues; it is an effective rejoinder to the more extravagant claims of the historical materialists.

All that is contended for the political interpretation of history is that political ideas and ideals may be something more than either rationalizations or derivations. They may be natural inspirations, exerting an independent influence upon the course of events. It is, of course, obvious, that many political ideas depend upon the special interests of those who come to believe them or serve the private ends of those who exploit their belief by others. But it has never been shown that all political ideas belong wholly

to these two categories. It probably cannot be shown that all so belong. This probability is enough for the advocate of the political interpretation of history. He will never rest content with the view that political ideas and ideals are nothing but rationalizations and derivations.

The advocate of the political interpretation of history knows that a satisfactory interpretation of history cannot be based upon any simple formula. Teggart has exposed the speciousness of some of the most plausible of the simple formulae of the past. Toynbee and Alfred Weber have made clear the enormous complexity of historical processes. Amidst the variety of interpretations which possess some measure of validity, there is abundant room for a political interpretation. Scholars who still persist in the search for a rational interpretation of history need not hesitate to go back to Kant, and to conclude with him that a philosophical attempt to work out the universal history of the world according to the plan of nature in its aim at a perfect civil state must be regarded as possible, and as even capable of helping forward the purpose of nature.

Belief in the political interpretation of history does not require the unqualified rejection of economic and psychological interpretations. It is possible to agree with Charles A. Beard that there is an economic basis of politics. It is possible also to agree with Charles E. Merriam that there is a psychological basis of politics. It is essential to believe merely that there is a political basis of politics as well, and that the existence of a political basis of politics involves the possibility of a political interpretation of history. In other words, political ideas, like the economic relationships by which Laski sets such great store and the persistent sentiments which give rise to what Pareto calls residues, may possess intrinsic powers of their own, enabling them by themselves alone to influence, if not altogether to determine, the policies of governments and the development of states.

The claims of the various interpretations of history may be further tested by trial in the court of universal history itself. The classical Roman Empire was organized by politicians and defended by soldiers, but it was administered mainly by lawyers. In the Holy Roman Empire, however, at least during its greatest centuries, lawyers were relegated to a minor rôle, and the leading parts in the administration of imperial affairs were taken by priests.

Modern Marxists, aided by the solid advantages of hind-sight as well as by the Marxist dialectic, can offer a plausible explanation of the preference for a legal education in the training of civil servants in ancient Rome and for more attention to theology in training for the public service in the Middle Ages. But can Marxists offer any convincing explanation in terms of their peculiar dialectic for the fact that the Chinese Empire was administered mainly by students of political ethics rather than by either lawyers or theologians? Confucianism, whatever may have been its merits as a religion, was certainly one of the most effective systems of training civil servants that any great empire has ever possessed. Whether the Confucian scholars were better prepared for the public service than the lawyers and priests of the Western world, it would be unprofitable to debate. That they were on the whole, until very recent times, well prepared for the duties they were called upon to perform, the long, if checkered, history of the Chinese Empire affords abundant evidence.

But what was there in the economic condition of the Far East under the Chow Dynasty from which some unknown precursor of the modern Marxists could have predicted that the Confucianists, and not the lawyers of whom there were then a plenty, would eventually gain the favor of the occupants of the Dragon Throne and administer the affairs of the Celestial Empire? The modes of producing wealth were doubtless not precisely the same in ancient China as in ancient Rome or in the medieval West; nor were they the same in China throughout the course of her imperial history. Yet did not the Chinese Empire continue through many vicissitudes to be administered predominantly by Confucian scholars? It is impossible to escape the conclusion that the political and ethical ideas, taught by the Confucianists, constituted one of the bases of politics, independent of economic relationships and sentimental residues, and that the general acceptance of the Confucian political ethics in China explains in no inconsiderable measure the development of the Chinese Empire. By the same process of reasoning, we may conclude also that legal and religious ideas have played a more independent part in the development of Western institutions than Marxists and Paretians are willing to admit.

The objection may be raised to the political interpretation of history that it does not enable us to know in advance the course of human events. Laski, for instance, in his plea for the economic

interpretation of history, makes a great deal of this objection. Referring to some of the rival philosophies of history, he declares that "the trouble with all such theories is a simple one. They do not enable us to predict the probable future of events. They leave us blindfold before our fate." The Marxist theory, as understood by Laski, presumably avoids this trouble. The head of the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute at Moscow, Comrade Adoratsky, is of the same opinion. In a recent exposition of the theoretical foundation of Marxism-Leninism, he quotes with warm approval the observation of Engels that "Marxism is not a dogma, but a guide to action." As a guide to action, the course of events since 1848 enables us to take its measure. Before condemning the political interpretation of history, therefore, for its alleged defective powers of prediction, it may be well to inquire how accurately the Marxists have been able to predict. In fact, the record of their miscalculations is well known. One illustration of their incapacity to predict will suffice—an illustration taken from the experience of Marx himself in attempting to grasp the meaning of one of the most sensational events of his own time.

During the years when Marx was earning a precarious living by writing European correspondence for the New York *Tribune*, the center of the political stage in the Far East was held by the sanguinary Taiping rebellion. On June 14, 1853, shortly after the Taiping rebels reached the peak of their power by the conquest of Nanking, the *Tribune* published an article in which Marx read the lesson of the rebellion for the people of the West. "Now England," he wrote, "having brought about the Revolution in China" (that is, as he believed, by forcing opium on the Chinese), "the question is, how the revolution will in time react on England, and through England on Europe." His answer to his own question was as follows: "It may safely be augured that the Chinese revolution will throw the spark into the overloaded mine of the present industrial system and cause the explosion of the long prepared general crisis, which spreading abroad will be closely followed by political revolutions on the Continent." That fatuous prediction was written over eighty-three years ago. Again, only ten years ago, Marx's spiritual heir, Trotsky, was equally confident that another Chinese revolution, then in progress, would cause the long overdue explosion in the "overloaded mine" of the capitalist system. But the revolution of the Kuomintang, like the Taiping rebellion, has run a very dif-

ferent course from what was predicted by the Marxists. As a guide to action, the orthodox dialectical materialism has been thoroughly tried and found wanting.

If it were true that the political interpretation of history affords only an uncertain guide to the future, it would not on that ground be more objectionable than other interpretations. But the question may fairly be raised, Is it desirable that men should be urged to believe that they can predict the course of future events? Consider, for example, the present plight of the communists, who have been taught to have faith in their powers of prediction. They have persuaded themselves that a dictatorship of the proletariat is inevitable. The fascists, on the other hand, while repudiating the notion that the basis of politics is exclusively or even mainly economic, appear eager to spread the opinion that the peoples of modern states must choose between the dictatorship of the poor under the leadership of the communists and that of the strong under their own natural leaders. Holding, as the fascists do, that there is a psychological as well as an economic interpretation of history, they wilfully believe that strong men can be the masters of their fate. This belief is one of the important causes of the momentary success of fascism in its struggle with communism for power. The fascist is confident that men can choose between communism and fascism, and consequently strives to bring about what he thinks is the proper choice. The genuine Marxist, on the contrary, assumes that in the long run the circumstances make the choice for the man, and, finding himself apparently on the losing side, concludes that he has been mistaken in his analysis of the situation. Thus, fatalism under adverse circumstances becomes defeatism, and power passes to the more vigorous leadership of the fascists.

It is not only fascists, however, who can profit by the faith in man's practical capacity to make a real choice. Democratic Republicans also, armed with a political philosophy which holds that accredited ideas, as well as vested interests and persistent sentiments, may be mighty for good or for evil, may believe both in human capacity to choose and in a wider range of choice than either communists or fascists. It is not the power of prediction, but the power to inspire faith in one's self and one's associates, that makes a political philosophy a vital factor in the course of events. A political philosophy which emphasizes the independent force of political ideas and ideals possesses that power. It puts formidable obstacles

in the path of those who would discourage the taking of thought for the improvement of human relations by urging the inevitable failure of all but one of the possible courses of political action.

Democratic Republicans are not blind to the signs of the times. They can see that modern methods of producing wealth are changing the structure of economic society and tend to bring about corresponding changes in the dominant ideas of sound public policy. They can understand how the profound modifications of the competitive system now visibly taking place compel the abandonment of the time-honored principle of *laissez faire* as the cardinal maxim of enlightened statesmanship. They may even concede that, since there is an economic basis of politics, there must be some alterations in the processes of government and in the structure of the state itself. It is clear that in the years ahead the sharper differentiation of economic classes and disturbances in their relative strength, like the unequal growth of different sections of the country in the nineteenth century, must have important effects on the course of American politics.

But it is very far from clear that Democratic Republicanism must inevitably succumb in the coming struggle for power. The division of the peoples of modern states into two economic or political classes does not exhaust the possibilities of classification in modern society. There are middle classes as well as upper and lower classes. The middle classes can believe in the possibility of rejecting both the policy of proletarian dictatorship and that of a dictatorship of the élite. They can believe further in the possibility of rejecting the economic individualism of the age that is passing away, without sacrificing also their democratic-republican principles of politics. The fates of American constitutional government and of *laissez faire* economics are not inextricably bound up together. Collectivism in its various forms presents possibilities for economic and political programs from which Democratic Republicans as well as communists and fascists can choose. Those who believe that political ideas constitute one of the independent bases of politics may well believe also in the practicability of such a choice and in the mission of the middle classes to maintain freedom to choose.

These considerations lead to the condemnation of all theories of politics which divide mankind into two sharply differentiated classes, whether superciliously termed the élite and the masses

or harshly called exploiters and exploited. There seems to be a tacit conspiracy between those who believe in an unqualified economic interpretation of history and those who intend to profit by that belief on the part of others without accepting it for themselves, to force the rest of mankind to choose between their two types of leadership. Professional students of politics will not be stampeded by any such conspiracy. They do not believe in the necessity for any such choice. There is no such simple dichotomy of the body politic. The classes into which the peoples of modern states may be divided are more numerous, less clearly defined, and more interdependent. The various theories of class struggle, whether advanced by communists or by fascists, make too little allowance for the observable facts of social and political classification. Above all, they make too little allowance for the existence and the power of the middle classes.

It is one of the great merits of a belief in the intrinsic power of political ideas and ideals—under the existing conditions, perhaps its greatest merit—that the classes which are most likely to gain strength through their faith in suitable political ideas and ideals are the middle classes. These are the classes which give character to modern states. By their nature and situation, they are clearly destined to be the guardians of rational ideals of justice and liberty. They are the classes which naturally find the greatest harmony between their own special interests and the general interests of the community to which they belong. Their political ideas and ideals are most likely to be what may fairly be called the democratic-republican ideas and ideals. The political philosophy which most promotes the strength of the middle classes constitutes, therefore, one of the best guarantees that Democratic-Republicanism will continue to flourish. The proper basis of such a political philosophy is a political interpretation of history.