

# Principles and Heresies

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## *Ferment Among Historians*

The eyes of the world are upon the tremendous ferment in the technology of the physical sciences; but less dramatic, yet in the end perhaps more fateful for our future, is the ferment in the philosophy of history. The way in which we see ourselves and our historical role will in the end shape our will. It will affect our being a great deal more deeply than the material instrumentalities with which we implement our will.

Western civilization, to a far greater degree than any other civilization of which we know, has been deeply concerned with the problem of history, with the passage of men through time, where "every moment is a new beginning" and freely willed thought and action are fraught with immense responsibility and portentous outcome. To none of the other great civilizations has this sense of man's responsibility in his course through history been so present a condition of consciousness.

Though we see this consciousness today primarily in the distorted form of the scientific and progressivist arrogance of the post-Christian *Weltanschauung*, it is a consciousness that came into being, and could only have come into being, on the basis of the sublime paradox of faith that created the West: the penetration of the Transcendent into history, vindicating the freedom of men in history. This folly to the determinist, this scandal to the relativist, has made it possible for Western man to grasp, as men of no other civilization have, the possibility of ultimate spiritual freedom. Neither the monism of materialism nor the monism of philosophical idealism can withstand the critical impact of the deep certainty of the West that man's existence is not wholly reducible to the *resultat* of material forces or the fixed and predetermined dictates of fate.

The relativism that has characterized the dominant thought of the West for the past century or more can in

this context be seen as a desperate and distorted attempt to deny the threatening determinism of material forces that seemed unchallenged in a world from which the transcendent had been exiled. But the relativist denial of essential reality, which reduces the roll of the ocean, the aroma of the orchard in spring, the clarity of mathematical achievement, the fullness of faith, the ephemeral symbols of ephemeral relations—this the Western spirit could not stomach. It affronted the Western sense of history.

The reaction flung wildly to the other extreme. The lyric determinism of a Spengler, the hesitant determinism of a Toynbee, the subtle Hegelian monism of a Collingwood, destroyed the feeble pretensions of relativist history. But it was a leap from the frying pan into the fire. The free will of the individual person is lost as hopelessly in their great systems as in the futility of relativist history.

## *A New Spirit*

In the past dozen years—the result perhaps of the latest stage in the immense and wracking crisis in which Western society has been gripped—a new spirit has been precipitated out. The towering genius of Eric Voegelin, the insight of Percy of Newcastle, the critical acumen of Herbert Butterfield are but the highest points in a developing movement of thought which rejects the two extremes of historical determinism and historical relativism, returning to the fundamental Western understanding of human history as the free acting of men, moving towards a transcendent destiny, in the conditions of a material world.

It is not only, however, in the work of these men and of many others who are explicitly proceeding along the same path (one could mention such works as Leopold Kohr's *The Break-*

*down of Nations* [Rinehart, \$6.00] or Marie Swabey's *The Judgment of History* [Philosophical Library, \$3.75]), that the sign of a great turn in the philosophy of history can be discerned. Great changes in modes of thought also carry along men who are striving deeply for an understanding of reality even when they are not prepared as yet to recognize that their ultimate terms of philosophical reference depend upon unsound premises. Two examples, drawn from widely different ideological worlds, may suffice to illustrate this tendency.

Professor von Mises, although he is without doubt the world's greatest living economist, has always shown a utilitarian bias on philosophical and historical questions, which carried to its logical conclusions could only lead to relativism. The power of his grasp of reality, however, which has enabled him to avoid relativist futility in his analysis of the laws of the economy, seems now to have affected his outlook on history. In *Theory and History* (Yale, \$6.00) the utilitarian bias is still strongly apparent in his formulations, but the judgments that he makes on critical problems of history break beyond the bounds of those formulations and show an astonishing affinity to the line of historical thought I have been discussing.

Much farther from this stream of thought than Professor von Mises is Karl Popper. His *The Open Society and Its Enemies* has been for some years quoted—at least in its title—as a manifesto for Liberalism. But whatever may be made out of that book (and much of it, be it said, cuts harder against the contemporary collectivists than against their critics), there is little in his newly published *The Poverty of Historicism* (Beacon, \$4.00) to please the Liberal mind. However different his ultimate philosophical attitudes are from those of Eric Voegelin or Herbert Butterfield, his historical criticism is a powerful intellectual weapon against determinism, whatever its origin.

A strong tide is moving, and it is not only sweeping the main channels, but working its way into all sorts of unexpected places. More than in any other area of intellectual endeavor, the trend of thought in the philosophy of history is a promising one.