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HISTORICISM AND THE MYTH OF DESTINY

It is widely believed that a truly scientific or philosophical attitude towards politics, and a deeper understanding of social life in general, must be based upon a contemplation and interpretation of human history. While the ordinary man takes the setting of his life and the importance of his personal experiences and petty struggles for granted, it is said that the social scientist or philosopher has to survey things from a higher plane. He sees the individual as a pawn, as a somewhat insignificant instrument in the general development of mankind. And he finds that the really important actors on the Stage of History are either the Great Nations and their Great Leaders, or perhaps the Great Classes, or the Great Ideas. However this may be, he will try to understand the meaning of the play which is performed on the Historical Stage; he will try to understand the laws of historical development. If he succeeds in this, he will, of course, be able to predict future developments. He might then put politics upon a solid basis, and give us practical advice by telling us which political actions are likely to succeed or likely to fail.

This is a brief description of an attitude which I call *historicism*. It is an old idea, or rather, a loosely connected set of ideas which have become, unfortunately, so much a part of our spiritual atmosphere that they are usually taken for granted, and hardly ever questioned.

I have tried elsewhere to show that the historicist approach to the social sciences gives poor results. I have also tried to outline a method which, I believe, would yield better results.

But if historicism is a faulty method that produces worthless results, then it may be useful to see how it originated, and how it succeeded in entrenching itself so successfully. An historical sketch undertaken with this aim can, at the same time, serve to analyse the variety of ideas which have gradually accumulated around the central historicist doctrine—the doctrine that history is controlled by specific historical or evolutionary laws whose discovery would enable us to prophesy the destiny of man.

Historicism, which I have so far characterized only in a rather abstract way, can be well illustrated by one of the simplest and oldest of its forms, the doctrine of the chosen people. This doctrine is one of the attempts to make history understandable by a theistic interpretation, i.e. by recognizing God as the author of the play performed on the Historical Stage. The theory of the chosen people, more specifically, assumes that God has chosen one people to function as the selected instrument of His will, and that this people will inherit the earth.

In this doctrine, the law of historical development is laid down by the Will of God. This is the specific difference which distinguishes the theistic form from other forms of historicism. A naturalistic historicism, for instance, might treat the developmental law as a law of nature; a spiritual historicism would treat it as a law of spiritual development; an economic historicism, again, as a law of economic development. Theistic historicism shares with these other forms the doctrine that there are specific historical laws which can be discovered, and upon which predictions regarding the future of mankind can be based.

There is no doubt that the doctrine of the chosen people grew out of the tribal form of social life. Tribalism, i.e. the emphasis on the supreme importance of the tribe without which the individual is nothing at all, is an element which we shall find in many forms of historicist theories. Other forms which are no longer tribalist may still retain an element of *collectivism*¹; they may still emphasize the significance of some group or collective—for example, a class—without which the individual is nothing at all. Another aspect of the doctrine of the chosen people is the remoteness of what it proffers as the end of history. For although it may describe this end with some degree of definiteness, we have to go a long way before we reach it. And the way is not only long, but winding, leading up and down, right and left. Accordingly, it will be possible to bring every conceivable historical event well within the scheme of the interpretation. No conceivable experience can refute it.² But to those who believe in it, it gives *certainty* regarding the ultimate outcome of human history.

A criticism of the theistic interpretation of history will be attempted in the last chapter of this book, where it will also be shown that some of the

greatest Christian thinkers have repudiated this theory as idolatry. An attack upon this form of historicism should therefore not be interpreted as an attack upon religion. In the present chapter, the doctrine of the chosen people serves only as an illustration. Its value as such can be seen from the fact that its chief characteristics³ are shared by the two most important modern versions of historicism, whose analysis will form the major part of this book—the historical philosophy of racialism or fascism on the one (the right) hand and the Marxian historical philosophy on the other (the left). For the chosen people racialism substitutes the chosen race (of Gobineau's choice), selected as the instrument of destiny, ultimately to inherit the earth. Marx's historical philosophy substitutes for it the chosen class, the instrument for the creation of the classless society, and at the same time, the class destined to inherit the earth. Both theories base their historical forecasts on an interpretation of history which leads to the discovery of a law of its development. In the case of racialism, this is thought of as a kind of natural law; the biological superiority of the blood of the chosen race explains the course of history, past, present, and future; it is nothing but the struggle of races for mastery. In the case of Marx's philosophy of history, the law is economic; all history has to be interpreted as a struggle of classes for economic supremacy.

The historicist character of these two movements makes our investigation topical. We shall return to them in later parts of this book. Each of them goes back directly to the philosophy of Hegel. We must, therefore, deal with that philosophy as well. And since Hegel⁴ in the main follows certain ancient philosophers, it will be necessary to discuss the theories of Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle, before returning to the more modern forms of historicism.