

**Karl Popper
and the Problem of
Historical Laws**

[1959]

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Karl R. Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism* is dedicated to the 'memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victim to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny'.

The concern with the role of political violence, expressed in this Dedication, appears in Popper's book in the framework of a discussion of historical and social theory. In the course of the discussion, certain theories emerge to which the tendency to violence seems to be germane, namely, those which believe in inexorable and predictable laws of history. Some of these theories – Popper calls them 'holist' – couple this belief with the notion that the State, Society, or the Nation are 'totalities' over, above, and other than the mere sum total of their component parts, governed by laws of their own, to which the individuals are subordinated. The notion of totality in turn implies, in these theories, the possibility of totalitarian control over all individual relationships, specific events, institutions, etc. Popper thus stipulates a connection between methodological and political totalitarianism: the former provides, as it were, the logical and philosophical justification for the latter. Consequently, a logical refutation of the former would prove the factual impossibility of the latter. Political totalitarianism would then be shown as 'Utopian' – and this is indeed the result of Popper's argument – an argument which, as we shall see, does not involve much ingenuity. As an antidote against totalitarianism, Popper recommends a pluralistic, gradualistic, and 'piecemeal' approach to history and society, which refrains from 'holist' notions so conducive to holist policies and holist sacrifices to 'historical destiny'.

Before examining Popper's argument further, I wish to discuss briefly the context in which it appears. It is a philosophical, more exactly, a methodological context in which the application of wholesale violence is explained in terms of a specific philosophy of history and society. Moreover, responsibility is assigned to the

philosophy of historical law and destiny (although perhaps not the entire responsibility), which includes, undifferentiated by Popper, the fascist ideology and the communist theory. And the same philosophy is held to be logically faulty, unscientific, and in this sense irrational. I wish to raise the question whether the philosophical context in which historical violence is discussed does not develop the problem on a level of misplaced abstractness, thus diverting attention from the real factors of violence, from its societal function, and from the historical means of combating it.

Now it is certainly true that a philosophy of history has frequently been used to justify the liquidation of countless individuals who, by their faith or origin, by their position in society, by their opinions and actions, were considered as standing in the way of historical destiny. Examples may be adduced from Robespierre's Republic of Virtue to the Stalinist terror. One might not stress unduly the concept of historical destiny if one goes further back and adds practically all crusades, inquisitions, religious wars – even those declared in the name of toleration and religious freedom. It is also true that Marxian theory contains the notion of inexorable laws of society – although here it is precisely the *abolition* of these *oppressive* laws which is the aim and the rationale of the socialist revolution. It is much less certain whether the fascist ideology has the idea of inexorable laws of history – rather the denial of history, acting against history, regression to 'nature' are characteristic of fascism. But this is largely irrelevant to the question whether, in all these cases, belief in historical destiny really explains terror. I propose that it does not: where it was prevalent, it was derivative from and conditional upon other factors in such a sense that a discussion which neglects these factors abstracts from the essential and suggests an incorrect interpretation of the causes, the function, and the prospects of historical violence. If these factors are present (I shall presently try to indicate them), there is no philosophy of history which may not lend itself to the systematic use of violence. As the history of liberalism from the seventeenth to the present century shows, the gradualist and pluralist approach is no exception – be it only

because of its incapacity to prevent violence and by its readiness (with good conscience) to meet violence with violence.

I admit that this last point can be conceded only if the indictment of mass extermination is not from the beginning restricted and made to conform with the standards and criteria of the society from whose position the indictment is levelled. In Popper's case, these standards call for a fundamental distinction between legal and extra-legal mass extermination: between war and civil war, invasion and police action, in a successful and in a failing revolution, by a legally constituted and a not yet thus constituted government.

But does not acceptance of these distinctions imply recognition that there are historically very different forms and functions of mass violence, which – while all morally repugnant and condemnable – have very different causes and aims? The question has direct bearing on Popper's analysis: because he abstracts from the real factors of mass violence, he arrives at a false generalization, obliterating the political features of terror in the contemporary period and minimizing its scope and prospect.

The real factors of mass violence are those which, in the respective society, make for the suspension of the 'normal' controls and of normal law and order. The facts are well known and a brief reminder will suffice. In the case of fascism, the expansionist policy of 'rectifying' the peace settlements of 1919 and of gaining more *Lebensraum* for the defeated states could no longer be pursued within the framework of the established democratic system and its large labour opposition. The unprecedented degree of violence corresponded to the extent of sacrifices and costs imposed upon the population. The people must be tied to the regime with all conceivable means: share in the spoils and share in the guilt; they must also be compensated for their victimization. Here is perhaps the ground on which the 'irrational' forces are released: sadistic cruelty, destructiveness, and stupidity – revenge against whatever and whomever can be blamed for the old and the new misery of the underlying population. Compared with these factors, the philosophy of 'historical

destiny' seems to be negligible. Indeed, rarely has an ideology been a more transparent rationalization, a more expendable by-product.

In the case of communism, the basic factors of the terror are of a very different nature. The mass exterminations accompanying the first Five Year Plan occurred in the course of the violent collectivization and industrialization, undertaken against a backward, apathetic, or hostile population. Even if one stretches the Marxian notion of inexorable laws of historical development to the extent that it stipulates advanced industrialization as an indispensable precondition for socialism, it will be hard to maintain that this notion played any decisive role in Stalinist policy. Rapid building up of the economic and military potential of Soviet society in order to enable it to withstand the 'threat of capitalism' and especially of fascism appears as the driving force behind this policy, and no 'holist' philosophy is required to explain it. The theoretical discussion was crushed, not consummated, by the Stalinist plan. As to the purges of the middle and late thirties and then again of the late forties: I cannot see how they are attributable to a philosophical concept by any stretch of the imagination.

These brief comments may serve to indicate one of the major defects of Popper's book. A philosophical analysis which remains abstract to the extent that it never reaches the historical dimension in which mass violence emerges and operates is of little value in explaining and combating it. I shall attempt to show that Popper's generalizations are theoretically untenable – but they also do violence to the empirical facts and events. To be sure, terror is and remains in all its forms and circumstances a crime against humanity – an instrument of domination and exploitation. This does not change the fact that terror has had very different historical functions and very different social contents: it has been used for the preservation of the status quo and for its overthrow, for the streamlining of a declining society and for the release of new political and economic forces. Understanding the historical function of terror may be an indispensable weapon for combating

it. The horror of slaughter does not wipe out the difference between the Jacobin terror and that of the post-Thermidorian reaction, between the terror of the dying Commune and that against it, between the Red and the White terror – a difference which is *not* a subtle philosophical point but a struggle of opposing political forces that changed the course of history.

II

Popper's analysis of totalitarianism is part of his sweeping critique of historicism. The meaning which Popper gives to this term is strikingly unusual:

. . . I mean by 'historicism' an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their principal aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the 'rhythm' or the 'pattern,' the 'laws' or the 'trends' that underlie the evolution of history. . . . And I have not hesitated to construct arguments in its support which have never, to my knowledge, been brought forward by historicists themselves. I hope that, in this way, I have succeeded in building up a position really worth attacking.

The last statement deserves some attention before we take a closer look at this notion of historicism. What a strange method: to build up a position really worth attacking and then to attack it! Why does the critic have to construct the target of his attack? I would have passed over the statement as a mere manner of speech if I did not believe that this method is characteristic of much of contemporary philosophical analysis. In reading Popper's book, I often stopped and asked: against what is he really arguing? who has actually maintained what he is so efficiently destroying? And often I was unable to identify the attacked theory (especially since Popper is extremely sparing with references).

In the philosophical tradition, 'historicism' has become a well defined term, referring to those schools of thought which emphasize the historical uniqueness and 'equivalence' of cultures. Historicism thus implies a rather high degree of pluralism and relativism, perhaps most characteristically epitomized in Ranke's

phrase that all historical periods are '*unmittelbar zu Gott*'. Neither predictability nor the idea of historical 'laws' plays a central role in these theories. Certainly, it would be entirely unjustified to insist on conformity with lexicographical usage. However, I think that such a strange deviation from usage should have firmer grounds than a construction built from disparate elements of disparate theories. Popper's construction is general enough to include practically all theories which take history seriously, which see in it the 'fate' of mankind: his opposition to historicism is in the last analysis opposition to *history*. And the construction is selective enough to enable him to establish a link between historicism and totalitarianism.

The book divides the whole of what is called 'historicism' into two main types of theory: pro-naturalistic doctrines, which claim that the methods of physical science can, at least to a large extent, be applied to the social sciences, and anti-naturalistic doctrines, which deny such applicability and insist on a scientific method germane to the social sciences. Popper presents and criticizes both types of theories and concludes that neither one can lay claim to a rational and scientific theory of history allowing predictability. He sums up his main argument against the predictability of history as follows: the course of history is 'strongly influenced' by the growth of human knowledge, but we cannot predict, by 'rational or scientific methods', the future growth of scientific knowledge; consequently, we cannot predict the future course of history. By the same token, there cannot be a social science or a 'theoretical history' corresponding to theoretical physics; there 'can be no scientific theory of historical development serving as a basis for historical prediction'. The fundamental aim of historicist method is therefore 'misconceived; and historicism collapses'. Popper's dictum of collapse seems to be somehow premature. He argues that a 'theoretical history' corresponding in method and aim to theoretical physics is impossible – a statement which few 'historicists' would contest. The essential difference between the method of the historical and that of the physical sciences has been one of the major points in the philosophical discussion since the

nineteenth century, but one looks in vain for a discussion (or even mentioning) of those theoretical efforts which were decisive for the foundation, development, and critique of historicism: Droysen, Dilthey, Simmel, Windelband, Rickert, Troeltsch – to mention only a few. These are not merely additional names or references which may or may not be there; their analysis of conceptualization in the social and physical sciences and of the ‘rationality’ of history has direct bearing on Popper’s arguments. Failure to face their positions in full strength may account for much of the thinness and abstractness of Popper’s discussion.

But apart from this failure, Popper’s argument against historical predictability seems in itself inconclusive. To be sure, the growth of human knowledge has ‘strongly influenced’ the course of history. However, as such a factor, it has in turn been historically conditioned. It seems that scientific knowledge has really influenced the course of history only as *accepted* knowledge, that is to say, if and when it corresponded to the needs and capabilities of society. The latter are facts and forces which operate in any given society as observable trends and tendencies, and these provide the ground for historical predictability – which is never more than projection of tendencies.

There are other theories which posit historical predictability and more rigid and sweeping ‘laws’ of historical development. They are mostly cyclical theories, assuming a return of the pattern of the past. Ultimately, they are derived from the idea of the basic unchangeability of human nature, which asserts itself through all variations and innovations. Thucydides and Machiavelli, Vico, Spengler and Toynbee may serve as examples. Their conception is fundamentally different from that according to which the laws of historical development all but preclude a return of the pattern of the past – so much so that they almost appear as the laws of human freedom, circumscribing the conditions for the exercise of human freedom, for the possibilities of change. Popper’s presentation and critique obliterates the decisive difference between these types of theories by submerging both in the constructed syndrome of ‘historicism’. We shall presently

return to this point, after a further brief examination of the syndrome.

III

Popper's abstract methodological discussion comes to life when it reveals its concrete political implications. His most telling arguments against historicism are in the last analysis political arguments, and his own position is in the last analysis a political position. The political dimension is not merely superimposed upon the methodological: the latter rather reveals its own political content. The awareness of this relationship and its outspoken development is a rewarding feature of Popper's book.

The political implications of the critique of historicism centre on the notion of 'holism'. (The word itself seems to revolt against its formation!) According to this notion (which Popper attributes to the anti-naturalistic doctrines),

social groups must never be regarded as mere aggregates of persons. The social group is *more* than the mere sum total of its members, and it is also *more* than the mere sum total of the merely personal relationships existing at any moment between any of its members.

Thus far this is a very harmless notion, and one may doubt whether even the most radical empiricist would seriously deny it. Popper goes on to distinguish two meanings of the word 'whole': (1) those properties or aspects of a thing which make it appear an organized structure rather than a mere 'heap', and (2) 'the totality of *all* the properties or aspects of a thing, and especially of *all* the relations holding between its constituent parts' (my italics). The first meaning, used in Gestalt theory, is acceptable to Popper, while he rejects the second as entirely inapplicable to the social sciences. It is rejected because a whole in this sense can never be described and observed, since 'all description is necessarily selective'. Nor can such a totality ever be the object 'of any activity, scientific or otherwise'. Popper links methodological and

political totalitarianism: 'It is for many reasons quite impossible to control all, or "nearly" all the relationships embraced by society, if only 'because with every new control of social relations we create a host of new social relations to be controlled'. 'In short, the impossibility is a *logical impossibility*' (my italics); logically impossible because the attempt would lead to an 'infinite regression' – as it would in the study of society as a whole. Popper himself seems to be somewhat uneasy; he adds a footnote which says that 'Holists may hope that there is a way out of this difficulty by denying the validity of logic which, they think, has been superseded by dialectic' and he says that he has tried to 'block this way' in his article 'What is Dialectic' (*Mind*, vol. 49 N.S., pp. 403ff.). I do not know who the 'holists' might be that entertain such hope and that 'may' deny the validity of logic, but the reference to the dialectic suggests that Popper is thinking of Hegel and the Marxists who are thus charged with an illogical 'totalitarian intuition' – although even the 'holist' Stalin emphatically asserted the validity of (traditional) logic. At stake is not the validity of logic but the adequacy of the logic applied. But the notion that society is more than the mere aggregate of its parts and relations does not imply that all or 'nearly all' public and private relations within society must be analysed in order to comprehend the 'structure' of a society. On the contrary, the hypothesis that such a structure prevails and asserts itself in and through all institutions and relations (defining and determining them) does not preclude but calls for a 'selective' analysis – one which focuses on the *basic* institutions and relations of a society (a distinction which must, of course, be demonstrated and justified logically as well as empirically). Similarly, for the totalitarian control of society it is not necessary to control directly *all* or 'nearly all' relations because control of the *key* positions and institutions assures control of the whole. Certainly, every new control creates new social relations to be controlled, but far from being an impossible infinite regression, this constellation perpetuates and propels the controls once secured in the key positions and relations: the 'new' relations are preshaped and predetermined. (It might be necessary to point

out that these comments do not imply or suggest that totalitarian control, once established, is unbreakable, but that breaking it depends on changing the very basis of totalitarian society.)

If the critique of totalitarianism, instead of 'constructing' its target, would look at the actual theories and at the reality of totalitarianism, it could hardly assert that totalitarianism is a logical impossibility. Popper cites Mannheim's proposition that 'the power of the State is bound to increase until the State becomes nearly identical with society'; he calls this proposition a 'prophecy' and the 'intuition' expressed in it the 'totalitarian intuition'. Now I think it is rather obvious that the cited passage has long since ceased to be a 'prophecy' and has become a statement of fact. Moreover, one may criticize Mannheim on many grounds, but to count him among the 'holists' and to charge him with the 'totalitarian intuition' is to confuse an analysis of observable trends with their advocacy and justification.

This confusion is characteristic of Popper's concept of 'holism', which covers and denounces equally theories with a totalitarian and those with an anti-totalitarian 'intuition'. By the same token, the concept obliterates the fundamental differences between the critical notion of inexorable historical laws, which sees in these laws the feature of an 'immature' and oppressive society, and the conservative notion, which justifies these laws as 'natural' and unchangeable. The idea that the Nation or the State or the Society are totalities over and above the individuals who must be subordinated to the inherent laws governing these totalities has often justified tyranny and the enslavement of men by the powers that be. But the category of 'holism' is also applied by Popper to the opposite theoretical tradition, exemplified by Marxian theory. According to this theory, the appearance of the Nation and the State and the Society as separate totalities reflects only a specific economic structure of class society, and a free society involves the disappearance of this 'holism'. Popper joins the two incompatible theories with what he calls 'Utopianism' and thus establishes the alliance of Plato and Marx – a fantastic syndrome playing an important part in his demonstration of the 'unholy alliance'

between historicism and Utopianism. The latter notion soon reveals its concrete political content:

... we find historicism very frequently allied with just those ideas which are typical of holistic or Utopian social engineering, such as the idea of 'blueprints for a new order,' or of 'centralized planning'.

For Popper, Plato was a pessimistic Utopian holist: his blueprint aimed at arresting all change; Marx was an optimist who 'predicted, and tried actively to further' the Utopian ideal of a society without political and economic coercion.

We do not wish to dwell again on the semantics of the term Utopianism: as the word loses more and more of its traditional content, it becomes an instrument of political defamation. Industrial civilization has reached the stage where most of what could formerly be called Utopian now has a '*topos*' among the real possibilities and capabilities of this civilization. Moreover, ideas and efforts which once were 'Utopian' have been playing an increasingly decisive part in the conquest of nature and society, and there is awareness of the tremendous forces which may be released and utilized through the encouragement of 'Utopian' thought. In the Soviet Union, science fiction writers are being taken to task for lagging behind science in their dreams and phantasies and they are told to 'get their imagination off the ground' (*New York Times*, 9 July 1958). Political interest in maintaining the status quo rather than logical or scientific impossibility today makes real possibilities appear as Utopian. Popper lends weight to his attack on Utopianism by again 'constructing' the theory he attacks rather than criticizing the theory as it actually is. It is hardly justifiable to call Marx's brief outline of the initial institutional prerequisites for socialism a blueprint for the 'social engineering' of an ideal society (he did not make centralized planning the distinguishing feature of socialism, and he never designated socialism as an 'ideal society').

But this may be irrelevant exegesis: what really matters to Popper is the argument against the 'holistic' idea of social change, i.e. the idea that 'social experiments, in order to be realistic, must be of the character of Utopian attempts at remodelling the whole

of society'. We have already indicated the basis for Popper's rejection of this idea: his contention that 'the whole of society' is a logically and scientifically untenable notion. Against it, Popper advocates the 'piecemeal' approach to social experiments, concentrating on the fight against 'definite wrongs, against concrete forms of injustice or exploitation, and avoidable suffering such as poverty or unemployment'. He supports this position by a pluralistic philosophy of history. According to it, one may interpret history in terms of class struggles, or of religious ideas, or of races, or of the struggle between the 'open' and the 'closed' society, etc.:

All these are more or less interesting points of view, and *as such* perfectly unobjectionable. But historicists do not present them as such: they do not see that there is necessarily a plurality of interpretations which are fundamentally on the same level of both suggestiveness and arbitrariness (even though some of them may be distinguished by their *fertility* – a point of some importance).

The parenthesis contains indeed a point of some importance – so much so that the concept of 'fertility', if elaborated, may well cancel the complete relativism expressed in the preceding passage. And as to the historicists not seeing this relativism: the view expressed by Popper has been one of the most representative positions of traditional historicism.

IV

Popper has herewith restated some of the philosophical foundations of classical liberalism; Hayek looms large in the supporting footnotes, and the critique of historicism is largely a justification of liberalism against totalitarianism. Liberalism and totalitarianism appear as two diametrically opposed systems: opposed in their economics and politics as well as in their philosophy. The question is: does this picture correspond to the actual relation between liberalism and totalitarianism? It is a vital question, and especially vital for a genuine and effective critique of anti-liberal

philosophies. One does not have to accept the Marxian thesis that free, competitive, private capitalism leads, precisely by virtue of its inherent normal development, to totalitarianism (i.e. increasing centralization of economic and political power, ultimately exercised by the state) in order to suspect that a liberalistic society is not immune to totalitarian trends and forces. The tendency towards the increasing power of the State is sufficiently noticeable in societies which are not exactly characterized by a predominance of 'holist' doctrines and in which the 'piecemeal' rather than the totalitarian approach prevailed. Were liberal gradualism and pluralism perhaps derived from the belief in a 'law' no less 'inexorable' than that assumed by the 'holists', namely the law of the market, expressing the harmony between the freely competing private interests and the general welfare? Has the market equalized or aggravated the initial inequality and the conflicts of interests generated by it? Has free competition, economic and intellectual, prevented or promoted the concentration of power and the corrosion of individual liberties? Have not these trends, in the democracies too, reached the point where the State is increasingly called upon to regulate and protect the whole? The existence of countervailing powers seems to be of little avail if they themselves impel centralization, and if the opposition is in the same boat as the power which it opposes. Moreover, industrial civilization has, at the national and international level, so closely interrelated economic and political, local and large scale, particular and general processes that effective 'piecemeal social engineering' appears as affecting the whole structure of society and threatening a fundamental change. Whether or not these trends lead to terroristic totalitarianism depends, not on a philosophy of history and society, but on the existence of social groups willing and strong enough to attack the economic and political roots of totalitarianism. These roots are in the *pre*-totalitarian era.

If these are really the observable trends, then the abstract opposition between liberalism and totalitarianism implied in Popper's presentation does not adequately express the state of affairs. Instead, the latter rather seems to suggest a 'dialectical'

relationship between two historical periods of one and the same form of society. Popper's rejection of dialectics is not incidental: an anti-dialectical logic is essential to his argument. It is so because dialectical logic is throughout permeated with what he designates as 'historicism': its methods and its notions are shaped in accordance with the historical structure of reality. Far from 'denying the validity of logic', dialectical logic intends to rescue logic by bridging the gap between the laws of thought and those governing reality – a gap which is itself the result of the historical development. Dialectical logic attempts to accomplish this task by bringing the two manifestations of reality to their actual common denominator, namely, *history*. In its metaphysical form, this is also the core of Hegel's dialectic: Subject and Object, Mind and Nature – the two traditional 'substances' – are from the beginning conceived as an antagonistic unity, and the universe as the concrete development of their interrelation. This undertaking involved a redefinition of the forms and categories of traditional logic: they lost their mode of 'yes' or 'no', 'either-or' and assumed that 'ambiguous', dynamic, even contradictory character which makes them so ridiculous to the protagonists of purity but which corresponds so closely to reality. The realistic character of dialectical thought comes to fruition in the interpretation of history. The latter may best be illustrated by contrasting it with Popper's view that historians are interested in 'actual, singular, or specific events, rather than in laws or generalizations'. In contrast to the opposition between 'singular' and 'law', 'specific' and 'general' expressed in Popper's statement, the dialectical conception holds that the actual, specific, singular event becomes comprehensible only if it is understood as constituted by the 'general', as the particular manifestation of a 'law'. And this 'general' is something very concrete and demonstrable, namely the society in which the specific events occur at a specific stage of its development. The dialectical notion of historical laws implies no other 'destiny' than that which men create for themselves under the conditions of unmastered nature and society. The less a society is rationally organized and directed by the collective efforts of free

men, the more will it appear as an independent whole governed by 'inexorable' laws. The manner in which men explain and exploit nature, and the societal institutions and relationships which they give themselves are actual and specific historical events, but events which occur on a ground already prepared, on a base already built. Once institutionalized, each society has its framework of potentialities defining the scope and direction of change. Historical determinism has freedom as a constitutive element: the latter is defined and confined by the 'whole' – but the whole can be (and constantly is) redefined, so much so that the historical process cannot even be regarded as irreversible. There are 'laws', there is historical *logic* in the sequence of ancient slave society, feudalism, 'free' industrial capitalism, state capitalism and contemporary socialism: one emerges *within* the other and develops, under the prevalent conditions, its own laws of functioning as a whole system of material and intellectual culture – a demonstrable 'unity'. However, these very laws do not allow predictability of progress. The present situation indicates clearly enough that a return to original barbarism appears as a historical possibility. Again: certainly not as an inexorable 'destiny' in a cycle of growth and decay, progress and regression, etc. but as a man-made destiny, for which responsibility can be assigned and which can be explained (as failure, impotence, even impossibility to act otherwise) – explained in terms of the structure of the established society and the forms of control, manipulation, and indoctrination required for the preservation of this structure. It then appears that the alternative to progressive barbarism (and there have always been alternatives!) may well involve a change in the *structure* of society, in other words, a 'holist' change which is Popper's real *bête noire*.

Here, I suggest, is the driving force behind Popper's attack on historicism. It is, I believe, in the last analysis a struggle against history – *not* spelled with a capital H, but the empirical course of history. Any attempt to rescue the values of liberalism and democracy must account for the emergence of a society that plays havoc with these values. At the attained stage, this development

threatens to obliterate the difference between war and peace, between military and civilian drill, between technical and intellectual manipulation, between the rationality of business and that of society, between free and dependent enterprise, privacy and publicity, truth and propaganda. These tendencies are afflictions of the whole: originating from the centre (i.e. the basic societal institutions), they penetrate and shape all spheres of existence. Moreover, they are not confined to totalitarian countries; they are not attributable to a 'holist' or 'Utopian' philosophy; and they have asserted themselves within the framework of pluralistic institutions and gradualist policies. Contemporary society is increasingly functioning as a rational whole which overrides the life of its parts, progresses through planned waste and destruction, and advances with the irresistible force of nature – *as if* governed by inexorable laws. Insistence on these irrational aspects is not betrayal of the liberalistic tradition, but the attempt to recapture it. The 'holism' which has become reality must be met by a 'holist' critique of this reality.

Freedom and the Historical Imperative

[1969]

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'Historical Imperatives': the phrase suggests the existence of historical laws governing the development of civilization, and, if linked with the concept of freedom, it suggests the idea of progress in history. I shall try to discuss the topic without accepting the highly questionable assumptions implied in the formulation of the theme.

Imperatives occur in history first as individual, personal necessities of action, derived from the acceptance of specific goals, ends. They are never categorical because they depend, for their validity, on the acceptance of such goals. To use again the familiar example: if Caesar wanted to defeat Pompei, it was imperative for him to cross the Rubicon. This course of action was prescribed, in Caesar's evaluation, by the end to be achieved and by the prevailing circumstances. These were 'given', thus the 'ought' followed from the 'is' – a conditional 'ought'. But the same example may serve to illustrate a very different imperative, which contains the individual goal and the conditional 'ought' while transcending them towards a supra-individual 'goal' to be achieved by supra-individual action: *praxis*. The institutions of the Roman state were no longer adequate to cope with the conflicts which had developed with Roman society, and no longer adequate to translate into reality the possibilities of growth opened by this society. Self-preservation and growth made imperative sweeping changes in the existing institutions: the transformation of the city state into the empire, of the republic into the monarchy. Hegel's 'cunning of reason': in and through the personal ambitions and actions of Caesar, the transition to a 'higher' stage of the historical development, i.e. of freedom, is taking place: the Subject, without losing whatever freedom it may have had, becomes the Object of historical necessity. I shall come back to the concept of the 'higher' stage of 'progress' explicit in Hegel's notion: there are good reasons to reject it – reasons which become more evident every day. Now I want to discuss the question whether Hegel's theory must be rejected because it is based on a mere 'value judgement', namely, that progress in freedom (quantitatively and qualitatively) is a historical necessity. The answer does not depend

on acceptance or denial of his concept of Reason as the driving force in history. We can well assume some sort of impulse, instinctive striving for freedom inherent in man, with Reason superimposed on it by the requirements of the Reality Principle. To justify the concept of objective historical imperatives, we have to recognize only one fact (or 'value') as historical datum, namely, that the dynamic of human existence is self-preservation *and* growth, i.e. not only satisfaction of biological needs but also development of the needs themselves in accordance with the possibilities which emerge in the constant struggle with nature (and with man). And it is also a fact that this struggle with nature has led to ever more and larger possibilities of satisfaction of needs. If this is the case, we can meaningfully speak of growth (in the sense indicated) as a force in history (without any teleological and moral connotations, regardless whether this kind of progress is good or bad, and whether it implies progress in freedom). And then we can meaningfully speak of historical imperatives in as much as the operation of this force depends on changing given social and natural conditions which define specific alternatives of praxis: the 'is' *contains* the 'ought'; the latter must be freed *from* this containment by obsolescent, and surmountable, forms of reality. Now we can raise the question whether freedom is implied or postulated by these imperatives. In one sense it certainly is: the individual must be free to acquire the means to attain his end: self-preservation and growth. However, this kind of freedom is variable to the highest degree: in history, it ranges from the mere physical ability to accept and use the means of subsistence, to the power of domination and exploitation. And it includes a rich freedom of choice within a strong framework of repression, of unfreedom. There is one brute fact which must guide any unideological discussion of freedom: since the beginnings of recorded history and to this very day, the liberty of some has always been based on the servitude of others, and the only concept of freedom that corresponded to the facts was the concept of 'inner' freedom, inalienable and practicable even in prison and at the stake. Whether called Christian freedom, or freedom of

conscience and worship – this has been to this very day the *only* freedom available to man as man: ‘essential’ human freedom. Essential indeed if the body is inessential, and if this is the only freedom which can be claimed as pertaining and as granted to all men, regardless of class, race, religion. Freedom of thought is already of a different order and far less ‘real’: it is freedom only if translatable into expression, and the latter has been politically restricted throughout history – if not by direct censorship then by withholding, from the larger part of the population, the intellectual and material means which would enable them to develop and express free thought. If freedom is man’s ability to determine his own life without depriving others of this ability, then freedom has never been a historical reality – to this very day. Does this mean that the imperatives of history preclude the realization of freedom in any other than a partial, repressive, ideological form? In other words: have the historical conditions not yet matured to the point where the self-preservation and growth of human existence would be real self-determination, not only of certain groups or individuals but of the species man – humanity? The affirmative answer is familiar: such integral freedom is precluded by the persistence of scarcity, the requirements of the struggle with nature, and the asocial character of human nature. Marxian theory integrates these three factors into the general concept of history as the history of class struggles. The objective imperatives of history were defined by the necessity of assuring the preservation and growth of a specific form of class society which militated against the realization of freedom. However, the productive forces (the term designating the sum-total of the resources for liberation available to a given society) developed within the class societies have reached the stage where they tend to explode the class organization itself: at this stage, freedom becomes an objective possibility; at this stage too, the historical Subject appears capable of building a society in which the imperatives of self-preservation and growth can become the imperatives of freedom: reconciliation of necessity and liberty. Again, the ‘is’ implies the ‘ought’, the status quo calls for its abrogation: the prevailing material and

intellectual conditions demand a radically different form of society in order to sustain human progress.

I have briefly re-stated the Marxian conception in order to show how its very limitations, nay its obsolescence, testify to its validity. If there is any conceivable sense in which it can be said: 'if the facts contradict the theory, the worse for the facts' – here it is. One could imagine Marx looking at the world today and saying: 'I told you so, not in my predictions but in my analysis of your society.' This analysis showed that all development of the productive forces by the established society would perpetuate and increase the productivity of destruction and repression, and that this fatal link could be broken only by the praxis of a class whose vital need was, not the perpetuation and amelioration but the abolition of the established society. And this abolition would be liberation: freedom appears first as negation; the 'positive' definition of freedom remains an X, an open variable – just: self-determination.

It must be noted that, in this conception, freedom does not appear as a historical imperative, in the sense that the prevailing conditions 'prescribe' it as the necessary next (or higher) stage of the development. The prevailing conditions are objectively *ambivalent*: they offer the possibility of liberation, and that of streamlined servitude, i.e. the vast administrative '*Gehäuse der Hörigkeit*' (house of bondage) which Max Weber envisaged. This is the ambivalence of progress: quantitative and/or qualitative; technical progress and/or the emergence of self-determination as the way of life, intellectual and material, of a new rationality and sensibility. Qualitative progress may well entail not only a re-direction but also a reduction of the development of the productive forces where the latter promotes waste and aggression, and demands the subjection of man to the machine. The transition from servitude to freedom requires a total transvaluation of values but it does not require that self-propelling quantitative progress on which capitalism depends for its survival.

Quantitative progress, as historical imperative, is part of the ideology and praxis of domination. To the degree to which the

latter depends on the technological increase in the productivity of labour and on the private appropriation of surplus value, it must of necessity foster and expand the production of commodities. And the higher the level of the productivity of labour, the larger the mass of luxury goods which become necessities of life and which have to be purchased by intensive, alienated labour. Under the technological imperative, society creates all the needs for the satisfaction of needs with a minimum of toil while subjecting the satisfaction of needs to the constantly expanding apparatus of labour. In other words, within the capitalist framework, technical progress creates the preconditions for freedom while at the same time undermining them. Liberation does not depend on the prevalence of abundance (a self-propelling notion which allows the constant 'postponement' of freedom), and the formula 'to each according to his needs' does not imply the insatiability of human nature. The latter concept too belongs to the arsenal of domination: it justifies the perpetuation of alienated labour and the submission to it. Freedom presupposes a stage in the conquest of nature where the vital necessities of life can be procured with a minimum of work and time so that production beyond the necessities can become a matter of self-determination. Marx believed that this stage was in sight, in the advanced industrial countries, already in the 1860s. Lacking were, not the material conditions but the political consciousness of the working classes and their organizations. '*The root of things is man*': the analysis of the prospects of liberation must break through the reification which mystifies the established society as well as the alternatives. It takes the historical Subject of change as something that exists like an object, while in fact this Subject (Marx's revolutionary class) comes into being only in the process of change itself. It is a *collective* Subject, and in this sense an abstraction, but the abstraction comes to life in the individuals acting in solidarity in a common interest.

The Subject emerges as the decisive factor: the historical imperatives are in the last analysis given by *men*. For the objective conditions which define these imperatives are never 'unilateral',

unambiguous: they always offer, not one, but several alternatives. The historical *choice*: socialism or barbarism, each of the two in different forms. The Subject is free to choose: in this choice of a possible historical praxis which transcends the established praxis is the essence of human freedom. And this freedom is not a 'fact', neither a transcendental nor a historical fact – it is the faculty (and activity) of men 'synthesizing' (organizing) the data of experience so that they reveal their own (objective) negativity, namely, the degree to which they are the data of domination. And this radically critical synthesis of experience occurs in the light of the real possibility of a 'better world to live in', in the light of the possible reduction of pain, cruelty, injustice, stupidity. To the extent to which this dual experience has seized the consciousness and sensibility of man, to that extent has he placed himself under the historical imperative *κατ' ἐξοχην*: the revolutionary imperative. It is indeed not only a political but also (and perhaps even primarily) an intellectual and moral imperative, for intelligence and morality themselves become revolutionary factors if freed from their service as handmaidens of repression. Apparently one can live quite happily in stupidity, and in a world where genocide, torture, and starvation are easily acceptable as just 'the way of life' – but it is getting increasingly difficult and requires the increasingly global management of human needs and faculties.

'To comprehend the world in order to change it': this formulation of the revolutionary imperative is an empirical postulate, derived from the very banal (and quite 'unscientific') experience of unnecessary suffering – unnecessary in as much as it is not required by the struggle for existence but imposed by the manner in which this struggle is organized and directed. Since there is no scientific logic according to which this imperative can be validated, it is indeed a *moral* imperative. There has always been a dual morality in history: that of the status quo, and that of its subversion: affirmation and negation – not for the sake of negation, but of 'saving' human values invalidated by the affirmation. This revolutionary morality is repressed in all those who have learned (or were forced) to live with this suffering – easily when it is the

lot of others out of sight who bear it nicely, less easily when it is the introjection of all the frustrations required by status and business. With the achievements of technical progress under advanced capitalism, this immorality of the beneficiaries of the high and blind standard of living has spread over a large part, probably the majority of the population; thus it has become a vital element in the cohesion and perpetuation of the status quo and its streamlined extension. Under these circumstances, the validity of the imperative seems anything but universal: applicable only to the technically backward peoples of the earth, and even there the imperative seems to be no more than the truism that people will try to subvert intolerable existential conditions. In order to clarify this problem, we have to raise the question: which is the structure and content of freedom as envisaged in the revolutionary imperative?

I suggested that the essence of human freedom is in the theoretical and practical syntheses which constitute and reconstitute the universe of experience. These syntheses are never merely individual activities (acts) but the work of a supra-individual historical Subjectivity *in* the individual – just as the Kantian categories are the syntheses of a transcendental Ego *in* the *empirical* Ego. I have intentionally used the Kantian construction of experience, that is to say his epistemology rather than his moral philosophy, in order to elucidate the concept of freedom as historical imperative: freedom originates indeed in the mind of man, in his ability (or rather in his need and desire) to comprehend his world, and this comprehension is *praxis* in as much as it establishes a specific order of facts, a specific organization of the data of experience. The human mind is constituted in such a way that it subjects the data received by the senses to certain concepts of rigidly universal order in time and space, and this act is the precondition of all activity, practical as well as theoretical. For Kant, the organization of experience is universal because it happens to be the very structure of the human mind: the transcendental *a priori* rests on the acceptance of a fact. The universality of this structure is a formal one: time and space and the

categories constitute the general framework for all experience. Now I suggest that Kant's transcendental construction of experience may well furnish the model for the historical construction of experience. The latter would be distinguished from the former in as much as the forms of intuition in which the sense data appear are *political* space and *political* time, and their synthesis takes place under political categories.

In the universe of this experience, all things appear as data of a hierarchy: an order composed of relationships of domination and subordination. To be sure, things are immediately experienced as specific use values, as aesthetic, sexual objects, etc. However, reflection reveals that their *Stellenwert* is determined by the power structure prevailing in society. If Marx defines the social wealth of a capitalist society as a mass of commodities, he makes this reflection the methodological principle. As commodities, things express and perpetuate exploitation, unfreedom – they are available according to purchasing power, which is in turn determined by the class character of the productive process. The synthesis of the data under political categories is an empirical synthesis, its universality is a relative, historical one, but valid for the entire society in all its branches, in its material and intellectual culture. It transforms everyday consciousness and common sense into political consciousness and political sense. And in this transformation originates the historical imperative of freedom: not only liberation in order to obtain a larger slice of the cake, or in order to participate actively in the administration and management of the established system but replacement of the system itself by one of self-determination on the basis of collective control of the means of production. This socialist formula is not restricted in its applicability to the advanced industrial societies: self-determination and collective control have always been possible alternatives of the organization of the struggle for existence; *mutatis mutandis*, the imperative of freedom has always been the repressed imperative of history.

Today, this repression (material, intellectual, psychological) has attained an intensity and effectiveness which makes it question-

able whether the imperative of freedom will ever be translated into reality. Today, it is more than ever before an imperative in the sense that it expresses an 'ought' which imposes itself on the individual *against* inclination (*Neigung*), personal need, interest. These needs, satisfactions, interests seem to invalidate the imperative, or at least to make it appear as an abstract idea, relic of a previous political tradition, surpassed and contradicted by the reality of the advanced industrial societies. There, liberation easily appears as the disruption, even destruction of a material (and cultural) well-being in which even the prevailing inhuman working conditions may seem the lesser (and reducible) evil compared with the terrifying uncertainties and horrors of revolution. The material and intellectual culture which is the mark of oppression in these societies may well continue to integrate the population into the capitalist system, and the latter may well be able to reproduce itself on an enlarged scale through neo-colonial exploitation abroad and militarization at home, plus the profitable conquest of outer space, and the collaboration of the Soviet Union. To be sure, this kind of progress is the manifestation of the aggravating internal contradictions of the system, but it can go on for a very long time, ravaging the people, the land, the sea, and the air, polluting the bodies and the minds – with the latter adapting themselves to the situation. So that the final explosion of these contradictions will not be the transition to a higher historical stage but rather to a perfect barbarism where freedom and automatism coincide.

Conflict between liberty and liberation: the latter, i.e. self-determination, would indeed reduce, and perhaps even abrogate, those liberties of choice and expression which reproduce, in the individuals who enjoy them, the established system. For self-determination presupposes liberation from this very system. Seen in the light of this system and its very material benefits, liberation appears not only as a subversive but also as a highly abstract, 'intellectual', utopian idea. Triumph of the morality of affirmation, of positivism. Not the 'materialism' of the people is to blame, not the high level of well-being, but that it is precisely the kind of

well-being which is required in order to reproduce and protect the existing power structure: the satisfactions are aggressive and yet submissive, administered and yet spontaneous, standardized and yet individual. This unity of opposites permeates the entire structure: it finds its supreme expression in the fact that the people freely elect the rulers who perpetuate unfreedom. The liberty of the masters goes hand in hand with the liberty of the slaves – once the latter have accepted the proposition that real self-determination of the one is irreconcilable with that of the other – provided that self-determination means more and other than the free choice of commodities, varieties of alienated labour, and of political bosses.

Still, the argument against liberation is a very strong one. In whose name and authority can the revolutionary imperative be imposed upon millions and generations of men who lead a reasonable, good and comfortable life? I believe there is one answer (and not an adequate one), namely, the right is with the victims of this system of well-being, the victims who pay such a large part of the costs and who are excluded from its blessings, the objects of internal as well as external colonization. For them, freedom means first of all liberation from brutal and corrupt regimes of exploitation, foreign and indigenous. This process will inevitably shatter the cohesion of the societies of well-being. Confronted with this threat, they mobilize and militarize themselves to protect the right order with brutal force, thereby proving their self-validating hypothesis that freedom demands repression. In fact, they are proving that *their own* freedom is incompatible with that of the others. But the answer is inadequate because the liberation of the backward people can never be effective and lasting without a corresponding change in the advanced societies, who are capable of meeting and containing the threat for a long time to come.

In these societies, the process of change assumes new forms, called for by the prevailing conditions of cohesion and integration. In the most advanced sectors of the capitalist orbit, the imperative of liberation appears as that of *contestation*. It is first of all a sign of weakness: absence of a revolutionary situation. A revolu-

tionary class does not contest, it fights for the seizure of power. But the contestation shows a feature rarely manifest in the historical revolutions, namely, the total character of its claim. The contesting groups and individuals refuse to recognize the established culture in its entirety – they reject participation in its politics, intellectual activities, etc., they refuse recognition of the prevalent forms and standards of behaviour, morality, etc. This makes for the essential isolation of these groups and their essential minoritarian character, and for their desperate efforts to link their cause with that of the ‘masses’, without which no radical change is imaginable. It also makes for the ‘abstract’ and often bizarre character of the contestation: the difficulty to focus action on specific, concrete issues which could involve larger strata of the population.

The total and abstract character of the protest reflects the actual condition of an integration the concreteness of which extends to all classes of the population. The Great Refusal aims at cutting the fatal link which ties the self-propelling satisfaction of needs to the reproduction of the capitalist system. This link is fastened in the individuals themselves; the needs of a repressive society have become their own; social compulsion appears as the liberty of the individual. Consequently, the revolutionary imperative assumes the form of a negation: to reject the needs and values which increase the social wealth while strengthening ‘voluntary servitude’ among the privileged population of the metropolises, and streamlining enforced servitude in their colonies, in the Third World. The idea that the latter can liberate the First World is utterly unrealistic: it misjudges the sheer force of the material and technical base of advanced capitalism. This force can be reduced only from within. The signs are there that the process has begun. Its manifestations are strangely unorthodox: the revolt of the intellect, of the senses, of the imagination; the weakening of the social fibre; the discrediting of the values on the operation of which the system depends; and the vast release of aggression spreading mental disturbances.

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outer space, planetary competition and aggression are being executed by robots in machines – still programmed and directed by men, but by men whose goals are circumscribed by the actual and potential power of their machines. And this power is in turn projected and used in accordance with the requirements of profitable competition on a global scale. Competition is becoming the work of machines: technical, political machines, and the minds which direct the machines are dealing with men as objects, and this reification transforms their mind into a machine. Thus, liberation includes liberation *of* the machine, *of* technique and science from their ghastly use – liberation from the men who today determine their use. For a free society is unimaginable without the progressive automation of socially necessary but dehumanizing labour.

On the basis of the capitalist mode of production, dehumanization is irreversible. Quantitative progress in aggressive competition is the historical imperative dictated by and dictating the self-preservation and growth of the system. Quantitative progress would turn into qualitative progress to the degree to which the destructive potential itself would be destroyed: use of science and technology for the total reconstruction of reality, with priority on the abolition of poverty and exploitation, and with the goal of creating an environment *à la mesure de l'homme*. The goal implies self-determination in the mode of production. The objective conditions (material and technical resources) are there, their liberating utilization depends on the emergence of a new Subject: a consciousness and a sensibility unwilling to reproduce the status quo – refusal to cooperate. Such a consciousness would have to emerge among those social classes which assume an increasingly vital role in the process of production, namely, the cadres of the technical and scientific intelligentsia, who in turn would activate the consciousness of the traditional working classes. Schools and universities, the non-integrated youth appear as the catalysts in this development.

Its unorthodox character (priority of the subjective factor, dislocation of the revolutionary potential from the old working

classes to minoritarian groups of the intelligentsia and white collar workers) corresponds to the new and unique historical situation: possibility, imperative of a revolution in a highly advanced and effectively functioning industrial society, with a well-organized and constantly improved military and police apparatus, and a largely satisfied population. In this situation, the idea of freedom appears in a new light.

For the beneficiaries of corporate-capitalist prosperity, freedom is what they have anyway (especially compared with the co-existing socialist countries): a rather rich freedom of choice, political, cultural, in market terms. This freedom is real and practicable within a rigidly structured social system, and it depends (or seems to depend) on the continued functioning of corporate management and administration. This administration itself is, behind the technological veil, dependent on the continuation of the struggle for existence, i.e. alienated labour and exploitation. Thus, the 'given' liberties militate against freedom, that is self-determination. The latter seems less and less imperative, less and less 'valuable' and essential to the human existence: the supreme choice, which is the origin and precondition of all other, namely, the choice of one's way of life, is not a vital need. Unless and until it becomes a vital need, restructuring the thought and action, the rationality and sensibility of the individuals, the chain of exploitation will not have been broken – no matter how 'satisfying' life may be. There is no historical 'law of progress' which could enforce such a break: it remains the ultimate imperative of theoretical and practical reason, of man as his own law-giver. At the attained stage of the development, this autonomy has become a real possibility on an unprecedented scale. Its realization demands the emergence of a radical political consciousness, capable of shattering the equally unprecedented repressive mystification of facts – it demands the political synthesis of experience as a constitutive act: to recognize the politics of exploitation in the blessings of domination. I believe that, in the militant youth of today, the radical political synthesis of experience is taking place – perhaps the first step toward liberation.

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