

HISTORY AS A SCIENCE

Hugh Taylor

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HUGH TAYLOR

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HISTORY AS A SCIENCE

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Two main motives have contributed to the progress of the world, the desire to promote knowledge and the desire to influence conduct. These motives, however, are not found acting in co-operation but in conflict. In this conflict conduct has always been considered as of more importance than knowledge. The opposition between the claims of knowledge and of conduct is frequently reproduced in the mind of the same individual, generally with a bias in favour of conduct. This has had an especial influence upon the study of social subjects and particularly of history, and is the main reason for the backward state of the science of history, because the historian is prevented by political and moral considerations from following the rules of a strictly scientific investigation.

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There is much controversy as to what the object of history should be. But among the many diverse opinions there is one object which has never been clearly stated. A proper study of history will help to teach man his relation to the universe. A study of history is also, of course, necessary for the improvement of the art of government; but as at present conducted it is largely useless for that purpose, since the desire to communicate political and moral instruction prevents proper scientific investigation. The course which the so-called science of sociology has pursued is a conspicuous instance of this truth. The scientific principles proffered by many writers, such as Lord Morley, are inconsistent with the method which they actually pursue in historical investigation. The ordinary procedure of observation, hypothesis and verification must be imported into history before it can become really scientific. In particular the subjects of government, war and of the causes of national success require to be studied in this way.

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Though much has been written upon government, the subject has never been treated in a strictly scientific way. The educational method of inculcating principles rather than the inductive method of observing facts has been followed. Historians for instance have, as far as possible, averted their eyes from the phenomena of absolute government which, on the inductive method, should be regarded as of the utmost importance. The intrusion of metaphysical ideas into history is particularly to be deplored, since it causes the observation of facts to be regarded as an entirely subordinate consideration. Moral philosophy also exercises a prejudicial influence by disparaging government and denouncing its need as a confession of moral failure. Constitutional historians are also engaged upon purely educational, not scientific, ends, and have caused exaggerated attention to be paid to the doings of "political assemblies" which are credited with achievements and powers which do not belong to them.

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Owing to reasons already laid down, the subject of war has never been properly discussed. Nevertheless, its inveteracy marks it as a phenomenon of the deepest scientific interest. It is the result of psychological causes beyond the reach of the individual, since bodies of men (nations) commit acts from which they would shrink as individuals. The only practicable method of terminating war is by a coalition of those nations who are satisfied with their present position, though the League of Nations may do useful preparatory work. With regard to the Great War, the English insufficiently realized in the beginning that it was not a war between France and Germany, but between Germany and the world, for which they should have prepared long beforehand. For the same reason it was the duty of the Americans to have intervened long before they did. The claim of the Americans to a superior international morality cannot be admitted. Though their selfish defalcation constitutes a setback to the peace movement, there is no reason to despair if due regard is taken of the psychological peculiarities of nations.

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Mrs. Webster, by an unemotional re-examination of the facts of the French Revolution, has given us a notable example of the inductive study of history, rejecting the usual educational method, which seeks to show that Revolu-

tion is merely a righteous punishment for misgovernment. The fact that Mrs. Webster's view of the cause of this revolution is weak does not in any way impair the main value of her investigation. Such a work has a political as well as a historical interest : especially at the present time when the scientific study of revolution is above all things necessary. Revolutionary excesses are the result of the abolition of a political control in the first place ; and of a certain mental perversion in the second. Revolution gathers its fatal momentum because rulers are initially ignorant of its real nature. It is never recognized that one of the main defects of the French government, and one of the main causes of the French Revolution, was the denial of the free career to political talent. Revolution can always be prevented or defeated by a timely resolve on the part of the law-abiding majority to come forward in defence of the constitution and of themselves, and this is a lesson which the English have now learned.

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History, which in the preceding pages has been regarded from the point of view of science, must now be regarded from the point of view of conduct. The art and science of politics must be kept distinct. Machiavelli has been condemned to obloquy because he found from a strictly inductive study of history that anarchy can only be cured by the forcible imposition of a strong central government, and advised Lorenzo accordingly. Morley's criticism is altogether uncomprehending and unjust. The case of Machiavelli shows clearly the limitations which are set to the use of the inductive method in history. Parallel between Bismarck and Machiavelli. The "real-politik" of the Germans which led to the war of 1914 was derived from an inductive study of history. Though the teaching of history cannot be closely followed, it cannot, on the other hand, be disregarded as Liberals, Radicals and Socialists believe. The differing requirements of knowledge and conduct are as striking in the sphere of economics as in the sphere of politics. The study of political economy has been relatively successful because it was coldly scientific. But the disregard of humane considerations which this treatment involved was rightly denounced when carried into real life, and was followed by the rise of socialism as a protest. Socialism is a tendency which is useful only if confronted by a strong opposition, and will benefit not by securing its own demands but by modifying the attitude of its opponents.

Concluding remarks.

“ The ideas which are to transform the study of history are lying unrecognized somewhere on the pages of the very text-books with which we have been familiar from childhood. To find a new meaning in old and well-established facts is the very essence of the scientific process.”—From the introduction to *Government by Natural Selection*.

HISTORY AS A SCIENCE

CHAPTER I

THE INHERENT CAUSE OF FAILURE

AMONG the various considerations upon which the progress of the world has depended, two will generally be admitted to have had very great influence. One of these is the desire to promote knowledge, and the other the desire to improve conduct. The advancement of knowledge and the maintenance of a reasonable moral code have been throughout history the essential prerequisites of civilization. There would be nothing remarkable about the existence of these two tendencies were it not for the relation in which they stand to one another. It might have been anticipated that those who desire to do what they can for the furtherance of the highest interests of mankind would devote themselves amicably whether to the mental or moral improvement of their fellow-creatures. The truth is, however, that there seems to be an actual incompatibility so far as the generality of the human race is concerned between the simultaneous promotion of these two objects. Knowledge and conduct, instead of being firm allies throughout the history of social evolution, as might have been expected, have been found to a large extent in open conflict.

Nor is this all. The interest excited by this curious phase of conflicting tendencies in social evolution is by no means exhausted by the statement of its actual

existence. The mode of its operation is equally important and closely concerns the argument of the present work. For it is remarkable that the contest has never been waged on level terms. Up to a certain point it is true that the interests of knowledge and of conduct are found to be identical, increase of knowledge implying improvement of conduct. Presently, however, it comes about that men are forbidden to devote themselves with equal earnestness to these two aims, and the reason for this is that at a certain stage of social development the progress of knowledge seems to threaten the foundation of religious belief upon which conduct is so largely based; and conduct, as a consequence, takes alarm and openly opposes the advance of knowledge except under conditions determined by itself. It is unnecessary for the writer to pursue this argument further, since a chapter has been devoted to the subject in a previous work.¹ It will be enough for the present purpose to discuss the matter only at such length as will serve to show its bearing upon the subject of the present volume.

Of this opposition a single recent but conspicuous instance may be given. When, during the nineteenth century, those engaged on geology, sociology and anthropology arrived at conclusions which were inconsistent with the cosmogony of the Bible, they were unsparingly denounced by the majority of their contemporaries for publishing views calculated to unsettle religious belief, and consequently to undermine the foundations of conduct. On the other hand, a resolute determination to enlarge the boundaries of science prevented men like Darwin and Huxley from allowing such considerations in any way to derogate from the right of free inquiry. This tendency to take divergent views as to the relative importance of knowledge and conduct is common in varying degrees to all the human race. To such an extent is this true that individuals may be classified according

¹ See *Conditions of National Success*, Chapter II.

as they incline to one side or the other in this age-long controversy. Not only will a cursory examination of the works of well-known writers show definitely upon which side their preference lies, but a few moments of conversation directed to this purpose with any person of average intelligence would enable the curious to arrive at a similar conclusion. Moreover, this divergence of interest will be found to distinguish different nations and different epochs as well as different individuals. The Romans and Spartans, for instance, assigned the greater importance to conduct, and the Athenians to knowledge ; while in the England of the nineteenth century, though the Victorians made notable contributions to all branches of Science, the interests of conduct were clearly held to be of the greater importance by the nation as a whole ; so much so, indeed, that the affectation of superiority which the men of the present generation have seen fit to assume rests solely on the fact that they have had the courage to break down the barriers in the way of the extension of knowledge which hampered their mighty predecessors.

But though we have said that men may be divided into opposing parties in this matter, the numerical strength on either side has by no means been the same. Those who range themselves on the side of conduct have always been in a majority and have in consequence been able to a very large extent to impose their will upon the community, discouraging the kind of knowledge not approved by themselves, and rejecting discoveries which are unpalatable from the orthodox religious standpoint. In all ages and in all countries there is observable a tendency on the part of the majority to arrest the progress of knowledge at a point where it seems to the religious members of the community to be becoming dangerous. Knowledge has in consequence been unable to profit to the full extent by the devoted eagerness and self-sacrifice of its followers, who might by this time have carried discovery to un-

imagined heights had they been permitted to utilize their full powers.

For a phenomenon so universal there must clearly be an evolutionary sanction ; and this sanction is to be found in the fact that great as are the interests of knowledge, the interests of conduct are more important to the human race. Evolutionally speaking, the possibility of any systematic development of knowledge is dependent upon the previous existence of a well-ordered society. But the existence of a well-ordered society is impossible without a well-defined and carefully protected code of conduct. As things are constituted it is a necessary condition of progress that the cause of conduct should have a stronger following than the cause of knowledge, good principles being more essential than wide learning for the maintenance of social existence.

Since men must live before they can know, they are by nature more deeply concerned in protecting the foundations of morality than in extending the range of knowledge. It follows that wherever the interests of these two departments of life come into conflict, it is knowledge that must give way. The social organism is, in fact, so constituted as to assimilate with readiness the teaching or information which is good for conduct, while rejecting that which seems bad.¹

There is, however, a further point of great importance to the argument of the present work. Hitherto this conflict has been spoken of as taking place between different parties. It may, however, be and very frequently is reproduced in the mind of one and the same

¹ That this should be so is in strict accordance with one of the main facts upon which modern philosophy insists, that life is only possible because our senses are selective. This selection "is effected by the organism responding apparently to what is a necessity of its own existence" (H. Wildon Carr). We see and hear and are intellectually conscious of not all that is to be seen or heard or apprehended, but only so much as is consistent with the maintenance of a healthy and vigorous life.