THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY
TO OUR GENERATION

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In one sense history is older than the human race. This certainly is true if history is regarded as what has transpired. In another sense history is the record of what has transpired. In this sense it is literature, to be studied by those who seek to understand the sources and mainsprings of conduct in order that they may become wise.

Even as literature, history begins so early that one may almost say history is prehistoric. The first records were little more than lists or tables giving the succession and genealogies of ruling dynasties. A German philosopher who distrusted democracy once remarked that "mankind begins with barons." Five thousand years before this Teutonic philanthropist saw the light, it seems to have been thought that the only human beings who counted for much were kings and queens. Such was the spirit that hovered over the pyramids, and it is not until one encounters Israel that an historical art or science concerning itself with the inner life of the people—their hopes, beliefs, aspirations, manners, and customs—begins, manifesting itself in the Old Testament books of Kings and Samuel, written in the seventh century, and in the books of Chronicles, written in the fourth century B.C.

Almost simultaneously with this growing appreciation of the human spirit in the magnificent literature of Israel, a similar school of history arose among the Greeks. Its chief exemplars were Herodotus of Halicarnassus, known to this day as the father of history, and Thucydides of Athens, both of whom portrayed the great men of their day. Herodotus is

¹ Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on March 31, 1936. Mr. Harper is secretary-manager of the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce and author of a four-volume work entitled Pittsburgh of Today: Its Resources and People (New York, 1931).
charged with romancing, idealizing his subjects much as Sparks idealized Washington and as those confirmed hero worshipers, Emerson and Carlyle, idealized many others. The present generation is inclined to believe that great men are the creatures more than the creators of their epochs. Sincerely as we love and reverence the immortal son of Nancy Hanks, twentieth-century historians are sure that slavery would have been abolished even if he had never lived. In Thucydides, as long ago as the fifth century B.C., there was apparent a foreshadowing of that discriminating appraisal of forces and personalities—the scientific spirit that investigates, weighs evidence, studies causes and effects—characteristic of the writing of history today.

A gifted Frenchman, Montesquieu, who wrote in the first half of the eighteenth century of the Christian era, created a new epoch in the science of history—for it is science essentially and art only incidentally. In his great book, *The Spirit of Laws*, he showed by laborious study of events and their causes that there are certain necessary relations that are the determining causes of the course of history. Compared with them, such matters as legislation, the contentions of parties, and the arts of powerful personalities are secondary and altogether subordinate influences.

In the nineteenth century, historical science made further progress. In England Henry Thomas Buckle applied a wealth of learning and prodigious labor to his consideration of the great influence that climate and other natural conditions had exerted upon the rise of English civilization. About the same time, a numerous and important school of writers led by the communists Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle held that purely economic forces determine the course of history and the rise and fall of civilizations. Even such epochal developments as the Renaissance and the Reformation were ascribed by this school to commercial, rather than to cultural, spiritual, and religious motives and forces. Freeman's trite remark that history is nothing but "past politics" was expanded into the view that it is nothing but the struggle of class against class for control of the sources of wealth and for the acquisition of such power and ease as wealth confers. No one surveying the twentieth-century world can fail
to discern how widely this economic or materialistic conception of history has been accepted. According to this view, it is economic considerations that engage the attention of governments in our day; it is economic urge and greed and pressure that have turned the nations into armed camps; it is economic trails that we are obliged to follow when we seek the causes of the World War. Our problems are economic problems: no one will ever say of our age, as it is said of the Middle Ages, that its dominant trait was spiritual passion.

And as we face today’s problems, which are multiplying much faster than the solutions, history admonishes us to listen to what it has to tell. Strangely enough these problems and perils have been faced many times before, and the importance of history as a guide in dealing with them is admirably stated by the new Spanish philosopher, Ortega, as follows:

Advanced civilisation is one and the same thing as arduous problems. Hence, the greater the progress, the greater danger it is in. Life gets gradually better, but evidently also gradually more complicated. Of course, as problems become more complex, the means of solving them also become more perfect. But each new generation must master these perfected means. Amongst them—to come to the concrete—there is one most plainly attached to the advance of a civilisation, namely, that it have a great deal of the past at its back, a great deal of experience; in a word: history. Historical knowledge is a technique of the first order to preserve and continue a civilisation already advanced. Not that it affords positive solutions to the new aspect of vital conditions—life is always different from what it was—but that it prevents us committing the ingenuous mistakes of other times. But if, in addition to being old and, therefore, beginning to find life difficult, you have lost the memory of the past, and do not profit by experience, then everything turns to disadvantage. Well, it is my belief that this is the situation of Europe. The most “cultured” people to-day are suffering from incredible ignorance of history. I maintain that at the present day, European leaders know much less history than their fellows of the XVIIIth, even of the XVIIth Century. That historical knowledge of the governing minorities—governing *sensu lato*—made possible the prodigious advance of the XIXth Century. Their policy was thought out—by the XVIIIth Century—precisely in order to avoid the errors of previous politics, thought out in view of those errors and embraced in its substance the whole extent of experience. But the XIXth Century already began to lose “historic culture,” although during the century the specialists gave it notable advance as a science. To this neglect is due in great part its peculiar errors, which to-day press upon us. In
the last third of the century there began—though hidden from sight—that involution, that retrogression towards barbarism, that is, towards the ingenuousness and primitivism of the man who has no past, or who has forgotten it.¹

In this view of the protective and preservative power of history we see history, not as revealed by those highly useful local annals that are the primary concern of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, but in the broader aspect of national and racial developments—the rise and fall of empires—the dawn, the full noonday, and the inevitable twilight of civilizations. Here in our society we have shown the great part played by Pittsburgh in the founding of America as an Anglo-Saxon instead of a Latin nation. We have had to fight to have that debt of America to us properly acknowledged and celebrated, for it has been well said that while Pennsylvania had the history Massachusetts had the historians. But our partiality for the writing of local chronicles and the upbuilding of local archives does not blunt our realization that we must also study the larger history and learn that if mankind is to be happy it must not embark in ships of state that carry neither compass nor anchor.

We must study the history of all nations and all ages, because, although this exceedingly advanced and complicated civilization of ours presents many new outward phases, there is truth in the French proverb that the more things change the more they are the same. That is to say, while the outside is altered, the heart of life is unaltered. The laws of nature, the necessary relations resulting from the inner realities, have not been repealed. Therefore, as Ortega says, it follows that history remains a technique of the first order in preserving any civilization, however advanced, inasmuch as it prevents us from committing the ingenuous mistakes of other times.

As our time is at least as tumultuous as any other that the world has seen and as the pace of political, economic, and social change has been accelerated as never before, it would appear that the ingenuous mistakes of other times might have been, or might even yet be, avoided by our own if for ingenuousness on the part of those who aspire and even pre-

¹ José Ortega y Gasset, The Revolt of the Masses, 100 (authorized translation from the Spanish, New York, 1932).
sume to govern there could be substituted real ingenuity and a genuine understanding of and willingness to learn from history. It was Hegel who made the oft-quoted statement that the only thing men learn from history is that men will learn nothing from history. Let us glance at just a few of the mistakes of the past that seem vainly to admonish those living in the present.

One is the belief that men can live without religion. That genial American philosopher, Earl Barnes, declared a few years ago that never before had so many men attempted to live without the aid, comfort, illumination, and strength that religion gives. We are undertaking to find in science, reason, and material conveniences what communion with a Father-God formerly gave. We are asked to be happy in the belief that our thoughts and aspirations are nothing but the residua of our chemical reactions, that morals are only mores or passing customs, that God does not create us in His image but we create Him in ours, and that not He exists but only that immeasurable physical cosmos of which we are an utterly insignificant part. The finest race in history, the Greeks of Athens in the time of Pericles, when, according to Professor Mehaffey, famous Greek scholar of the University of Dublin, any one of the 150,000 citizens was intellectually equal or superior to the average member of the British Parliament a generation ago, was also asked to believe in this atheistic pantheism. For hundreds of years the Greek mind was dominated by this idea, while Greek civilization declined.

Yet never, said Professor Draper in his history of intellectual development in Europe,

will man be satisfied with such a conclusion. It offers him none of that aspect of personality which his yearnings demand. This infinite, and eternal, and universal is no intellect at all. It is passionless, without motive, without design. It does not answer to those lineaments of which he catches a glimpse when he considers the attributes of his own soul. He shudderingly turns from Pantheism, this final result of human philosophy, and, voluntarily retracing his steps, subordinates his reason to his instinctive feelings; declines the impersonal as having nothing in unison with him, and asserts a personal God, the Maker of the universe and the Father of men.\(^3\)

And so the matchless Greek mind, having for centuries made the mistake of banishing religion from the art of life, eventually corrected itself in the Gospel According to St. John; and the twentieth century may yet be forced to a similar retraction, for even the apostles of science—for example, Sir Arthur Keith—warn us that the day on which man becomes a perfectly rational being will mark his end. When we turn to the realm of politics and government on one hand, and the social life of the age on the other, we become conscious of a number of ingenuous mistakes of the past that are being assiduously copied by the present. Let us enumerate some of these widely prevalent misconceptions, of which almost any ordinary observer can see the outcroppings on all sides, whether he happens to live in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, England, or the United States.

One current notion is that the good life consists in the abundance of the things that a man possesses, although Jesus declared the contrary. Another notion is that democracy is an end in itself, instead of being merely a means to an end, and that it can serve the requirements of a true civilization adequately without regard to knowledge or a sense of responsibility. Closely related notions, just as dangerously erroneous, are that the state can be trusted to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves; that commercial and industrial enterprise can flourish without rendering social service; that business men are corrupt and politicians pure; that men are entitled to what they desire whether they earn it or not; that comfort and security are worth more than freedom; and that if only we grant the state enough power it can relieve us from the natural penalties of improvidence and self-indulgence and distribute universal prosperity without regard to our capacity or will to use it to the advantage either of ourselves or of our fellows.

The air is full of the gospel of collectivism and the totalitarian state. The freedom of the individual to work out his own salvation through the virtues of industry, perseverance, self-denial, self-discipline, and thrift is an out-moded philosophy. Not even in our own country is the ideal that inspired our beginnings safe. The passion at the moment apparently is not for freedom so much as for something by which, it seems to many of us, freedom is being imperiled. In America we pause between conflicting
appeals, confused and hesitant, while ethnic civilizations older than ours, which a generation ago thrilled with the passion for freedom, are helpless in the clutches of tyrannies as remorseless as any in the last two thousand years.

The tragedy of the new enslavement, whether in Russia, Germany, or Italy, is the background of undeniable provocation and plausible intention upon which in considerable measure it rests. Industrial errors, serious social maladjustments, the outrageous wrongs done by nations to nations, the antagonisms of social groups to other social groups—all these have started the "blind mouths" talking mankind back into ways that have never led anywhere but to disaster.

The incalculable price that was paid for our freedom, economic no less than civil and religious, conjures us not to give it up save for good cause. Bishop Magee of Peterborough a generation or more ago shocked some of his fellow clerics by gravely declaring that it was better for England to be free than sober. His evaluation of freedom was higher and more accurate than that of the reformers who think in blood in Germany, Italy, and Russia, each in his own way shackling and degrading a great people.

Whether or not we believe that the world's economic and political disorder is due more to the World War than to any inherent defects in capitalism, we shall do well to be at least as skeptical as Jesus in regard to the ability of mankind to attain happiness through the power of the state. Furthermore, His skepticism has been matched if not exceeded by that of the most acute modern social and political philosophers. The greatest of these would unite in expositing against the inordinate powers that are being seized by civil governments in our day. One doubts if Emerson could report today as he did in his essay on "Politics" in 1844: "The tendencies of the times favor the idea of self-government, and leave the individual, for all code, to the rewards and penalties of his own constitution; which work with more energy than we believe whilst we depend on artificial restraints."

The sage of Concord would find today a tendency of the times alarmingly away from the idea of self-government, with artificial restraints multiplying rapidly on every side. Despite this current lapse from the
idea of self-government we may concede that he would none the less continue to affirm: "The less government we have the better—the fewer laws and the less confided power."

Herbert Spencer studied social development and social ethics with as much patience and scientific detachment as any man of his century. His final judgment was that the proper goal of social development is a condition of equilibrium in which the individual is as little interfered with by his society—that is, by the state or government—as possible, in so far as interference would involve coercion or restraint. When state power, said Spencer, is applied to social purposes, its action is "invariably slow, stupid, extravagant, unadapted, corrupt and obstructive."

Of all the great philosophers and historians who have studied the state, however, Buckle is the one whose conclusions most absolutely and overwhelmingly discourage any expectation that through the Fascist state, the Soviet state, the Nazi state, or any other state that is undertaking to put political power in control of economic life will a true civilization or a tolerable degree of human happiness be attained. He holds that to anyone who has studied history in its original sources the notion that the civilization of Europe is chiefly owing to the ability that has been displayed by the different governments, or to the sagacity by which the evils of society have been palliated by legislative remedies, must appear too extravagant to refute with becoming gravity. No great political improvement, no great reform, either legislative or executive, has ever, Buckle tells us, been originated in any country by its rulers, whose measures are invariably the result of social progress, not the cause of it. In his history of the civilization of his own country, England, he describes a governmental policy that would almost seem to have been plagiarized from the governmental program in the United States today. Note the following:

Among the accessories of modern civilization, there is none of greater moment than trade, the spread of which has probably done more than any other single agent to increase the comfort and happiness of man. But every European government which has legislated much respecting trade, has acted as if its main object were to suppress the trade, and ruin the traders. Instead of leaving the national industry to take its own course, it has been troubled by an interminable series of regulations, all intended for its good, and all inflicting serious
harm. To such a height has this been carried, that the commercial reforms which have distinguished England during the last twenty years [1837–1857], have solely consisted in undoing this mischievous and intrusive legislation. . . .

In every quarter, and at every moment, the hand of government was felt. Duties on importation, and duties on exportation; bounties to raise up a losing trade, and taxes to pull down a remunerative one; this branch of industry forbidden, and that branch of industry encouraged; one article of commerce must not be grown, because it was grown in the colonies, another article might be grown and bought, but not sold again, while a third article might be bought and sold, but not leave the country. Then, too, we find laws to regulate wages; laws to regulate prices; laws to regulate profits; laws to regulate the interest of money; custom-house arrangements of the most vexatious kind, aided by a complicated scheme, which was well called the sliding scale,—a scheme of such perverse ingenuity, that the duties constantly varied on the same article, and no man could calculate beforehand what he would have to pay. To this uncertainty, itself the bane of all commerce, there was added a severity of exaction, felt by every class of consumers and producers. The tolls were so onerous, as to double and often quadruple the cost of production. A system was organized, and strictly enforced, of interference with markets, interference with manufactories, interference with machinery, interference even with shops. The towns were guarded by excisemen, and the ports swarmed with tide-waiters, whose sole business was to inspect nearly every process of domestic industry, peer into every package, and tax every article; while, that absurdity might be carried to its extreme height, a large part of all this was by way of protection: that is to say, the money was avowedly raised, and the inconvenience suffered, not for the use of the government, but for the benefit of the people; in other words, the industrious classes were robbed, in order that industry might thrive.  

So much for the ingenuous mistake of Great Britain in 1837, which, we are told, the good life requires us to copy in America a hundred years from that date.

One of the most prominent business men in America recently confessed that under the lashings of current political trends he had been delving into ancient and medieval history to a larger extent than is perhaps good for a plain business man. He found that during the years of Rome's decadence industry and agriculture were organized under administrations quite like the NRA codes; that the imperial government distributed relief to the needy provinces, just as Washington does today; that the Emperor Domitian ordered half the vineyards destroyed, just as

we saw our cotton plowed under; that this measure caused a shortage of
wine just as our birth control for pigs made pork a prohibitive luxury.
These measures brought the small farmers of Rome to ruin under their
burden of mortgages, and the lands fell into the hands of capitalists who
farmed them on the tenant system—all exactly paralleled in our recent
Yankee experience. Brushing the dust off more of his books, our plain
business man learned that the Emperor Nerva set up a federal farm-loan
system to provide cheap money for the farmers, but the money had to
come through taxes laid on the rest of the people. And, as might have
been anticipated, the tax burden became so heavy that ultimately the
whole system collapsed. We may be sure that our Spanish historian-
philosopher, Ortega, had this experiment in mind when he referred to
history as a technique of the first order for preserving a civilization and
preventing it from committing the ingenuous mistakes of other times.

Civilization stands today at the crossroads where it must determine
either to preserve the existing social and industrial order or to take a path
that threatens the loss of the unparalleled social, industrial, and cultural
gains of the last one hundred and fifty years—gains surpassing those of
any previous thousand years in human history. The profit motive and
economic freedom, functioning in a political system that honestly limits
itself to a minimum of economic regulation instead of presuming to un-
dertake the maximum, is the best guarantee of genuine and lasting so-
cial advantage. We are privileged to believe, in reading the history of
the century and a half since the beginning of the industrial revolution
and the rise of capitalism, that the profit motive is not the ogre its ene-
mies make it out to be, because in the absence of monopoly and in the
presence of free competition the enterprise that does not render real so-
cial service will perish. The open sores of the world have excited com-
passion from the earliest days of civilization, but immeasurably more
headway has been made in our era toward their healing by the natural
functioning of the acquisitive, the competitive, and the self-reliant and
self-developing instincts of men than in all preceding eras. It is a vivid
figure of speech that Dr. Moulton of the Brookings Institution uses
when he says that we may take the dial of a clock as representing the
social history of mankind from the lowest savagery up to the present
time: that the twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes prior to twenty-four o'clock will stand for human history up to the advent of capitalism, and the last five minutes on the dial for the capitalistic era; and that in those five minutes has come to man virtually everything that distinguishes his existence from that of the beasts in the fields.

In this wonderful last five minutes on the clock the common man has developed as never before. Here has been the only space in recorded time when, as one stood by the ladder of life, one could plainly hear the wooden shoe going up and the velvet boot coming down. Why should we believe that any system that harks back to the ingenuous errors of the past will bring to the mass of men the material blessings that they crave, or what is more important, the spiritual development that is essential to a truly civilized society?

Guizot two or three generations ago commented upon the delusive faith that so many hold in the sovereign power of political machinery. They appear to think that governmental bounty can somehow fail to destroy a nation's character. No contemporary historian or philosopher is more deeply imbued with the menace of the magnified twentieth-century state than is Ortega. He warns us not to underestimate the significance of two mighty developments unfolding themselves side by side in the modern world. The first of these is a wholly unforeseen increase of population. Europe, whose population never exceeded 180 millions until a little over a hundred years ago, suddenly gained more population in one century than in the eighteen centuries preceding, and at the beginning of the twentieth century found itself with 460 millions. This amazing multiplication of human beings explains why modern civilization, to quote H. G. Wells, is an exciting and uncertain race between education and catastrophe. The other great contemporary development is not physical but psychical. It is the rise and rapid propagation of an attitude of mind, a set of terms, in which the modern world's unprecedentedly enormous masses are encouraged by false prophets to exalt the state. Ortega's new mass-man, his senses excited by the magical ability of mechanical invention to supply wants, has become conscious of wants almost without limit—wants not confined to necessaries but embracing countless things in former ages accounted fabulous luxuries—satisfactions that he cannot earn
for himself by social service but that he nevertheless believes to be his due and that he is determined to obtain. What more inevitable than that under the conditions of today demagogues should rise bidding us all to turn to the state as the genius of the magic lamp, by whose kindly offices we shall reap where we have not sown and be exempt from the natural penalties of incapacity or improvidence?

There are millions, ignorant of the history of the state, of its impotence to work the wonders they ask, and of its ultimate antisocial character, who are in no mood to examine the credentials of this vast entity professing so much concern for their well-being and pretending obedience to their wishes. Blind optimism may regard such a condition unperturbed, but a sober reading of history lends at least some measure of plausibility to the forebodings of Ortega, who concludes that

the result of this tendency will be fatal. Spontaneous social action will be broken up over and over again by State intervention; no new seed will be able to fructify. Society will have to live for the State, man for the governmental machine. And as, after all, it is only a machine whose existence and maintenance depend on the vital supports around it, the State, after sucking out the very marrow of society, will be left bloodless, a skeleton, dead with that rusty death of machinery, more gruesome than the death of a living organism. Such was the lamentable fate of ancient civilisation.

Thus, in this hour of meditation upon the message that history brings to our generation, we arrive at a challenging question—the question whether the long struggle for the true society is not entering upon a phase—not new, but encountered many times before in the experience of man—in which the goal is doomed to be missed, because like children we have listened to fairy tales and like children have wished to be carried to bed, instead of bearing ourselves like men and keeping ourselves at all times mindful that we can lose all the gold in all the mines of the world better than the riches of mind and heart and those rock-ribbed virtues of self-discipline, self-development, self-government, and self-denial, over which nature has charted the only road to the appointed haven of our highest dreams and desires.

5 Ortega, Revolt of the Masses, 133.