

## RECURRENT HISTORY

For the last two or three years my students have been asking me to explain the concept of historical law. I know for a fact that they have discussed this topic among themselves. This curiosity does not necessarily emanate from the Marxist group, where it would find a fairly natural place. And I am wondering whether I am witnessing—from afar—a phenomenon of ideological maturation such as we experienced as a result of the second world war. At that time, with my studies ended, I had left a university at which the conception of the objective of history was (for the students) strictly orthodox (history as a study of fact in its unique aspect). In 1945 I came across a university in which the vast majority of the students were impregnated with the spirit of “*Annales*.” I never really knew how this had come about. It certainly was not due to the teachers—they were, and had remained, the same. At that time there was no such thing as an “assistant.” But it must be admitted that the students were, to some extent, inhaling the mood of the moment. Today, in this mood of the moment, we are faced with a host of questions about the concepts of recurrence and historical law.

Translated by Simon Pleasance.

One can only situate and appreciate the importance of this situation with any accuracy by considering the recent evolution of historical thinking.

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Much has been written about the history of historiography and about historians as historians; much has been written about the technique of historical work, and about the basic features of the historian's trade. This is important and deserves expression, but it is a sadly neglected aspect: this aspect of the social rendering of historical work, or, to be more precise, of the use of history. It is not, of course, a question of the use of history which historians connect with their studies: it concerns the use of history as recognised by society. It would seem that very little has been discussed about this aspect of the historian. But this can be explained: up to a moment in time which is not that removed, the use of history was accepted without more ado, both by influential sectors and by a very widespread cross-section of people. In effect, history fulfilled various functions which had a social usefulness. These functions were only very indirectly those which traditional historians—even today—lay claim to (the exact and sincere reconstruction of past events, and a critical moulding of men's minds). Nor are they those postulated by historians who have been won over by the new conceptions of history (the analysis of the evolution of societies by the determining factors and the extent of the various elements; the study of constants in the hope of securing rules which are valid for a multitude of eras and societies; and, consequently, and in the last analysis, the formation of a handbook of laws which govern the social behaviour of men throughout space and time, which would result in creating an intelligible picture of the present). No, those functions which history in effect enacted, and which were both completely independent, were, on the one hand, to supply the intellectual material necessary for the formation of the mind of the statesman (or in a more general sense of the "honest man,") and, on the other, to document and elaborate the diffusion of certain conceptions which are essential to certain powers.

The efficacy of history with regard to propaganda is closely

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linked with its most fundamental aspect: history is concerned with the past. Now, man has an indomitable propensity for regarding as legitimate whatever is rooted in the past. In order to make a present state of affairs (present at a given time) appear beyond question, it is necessary to prove the antiquity of this state. "Rights" and "laws" are therefore proven most effectively by history. "Consciousness of common appurtenance" is rendered or kept alive by the constant reminder of the existence of a common past. For thousands of years, historians (and epic poets—for the two are somewhat analagous in this context) have applied their minds to this task in the most widely differing societies ("primitive" and "advanced.") We find this expressed in the epics of African societies as we do in the dynastic histories of the Middle Ages, and as we do in the national histories which have been written right up to the present time. We can trace a single thread from Francos' *Gesta Dei* to the work of Treitschke or Pirenne's *History of Belgium*. When King William I was crowned king of the Netherlands (Holland and Belgium united), he made haste to invite bids (on December 23rd 1826) for a plan to write a "General History of the Netherlands"—namely the complex of territories over which the Congress of Vienna had called him to reign! The motives are not hard to see! And the king's invitation was answered by a considerable number of historians.

One can hold varying opinions about the "morality" of this function of history. But one cannot dispute the fact that it renders history "of use" to those in power.

With regard to the other function—history as a philosophy of the statesman—we find this very clearly expressed as far back as Thucydides, who mentions "that he was found to be useful (and it is worth noting the term) by anyone who would have a certain view of events in the past and of similar or analagous events, which will recur thanks to the interplay of human nature." Certainly this is so: everyone can want to know about the past, but it is quite evident that a knowledge of this particular past—i.e. the recurrent universal past (because it is bound up with "human nature")—is first and foremost of interest to those who aspire to govern other men. For them it is essential that they be acquainted with the way in which patterns of human behaviour have a tendency to form a chain, and also essential, in

consequence, that they know how to make their manoeuvres. Here again—and this time by exact reconstruction of the past—history therefore “was of service,” and particularly to those who were socially influential.

If Thucydides is right, one can “draw lessons from history.” And this idea has been and still is received very generally by the “man in the street” if not by all historians. “Read your history books again” in the words of Monsieur Homains, and how many times has each one of us heard the lessons of the past invoked, by politicians of course, but also in far broader human groups in discussions about a vast variety of themes.<sup>1</sup> What I am saying here in a specific sense—and I feel bound to make this clear—is valid for the “western” world exclusively. One need hardly mention the fact that in the Marxist sphere general patterns of behaviour (politically speaking for example) are related explicitly to a clearly defined historical conception of the evolution of society. This obviously presupposes a total adherence to the existence of a history which evolves in accordance with already determined and recognised laws.

Things are different in the West: the concept of historical laws or of the universal recurrence of sequences in the evolution of societies—indeed even the admission of recurrence—is still questioned by historians,<sup>2</sup> if not by the man in the street.

We shall come back to this point. Let us say for the time being that historians formerly (and until very recently) made practically

<sup>1</sup> Since I started this essay, a few weeks ago, and because my attention was particularly drawn in this direction, I had no difficulty in compiling a list of examples of recourse to the “lessons of history,” sometimes in readers’ letters to newspapers, sometimes in the memoirs of diplomats, or propaganda pamphlets. It is clear that one conceives the “lessons of history” on two different planes. The most frequent case is the reference to a particular event. Thus the Minister of Defence of my own country has just published (April 1971) a pamphlet justifying the present military policy of Belgium by the “lessons of 1914 and 1940.” Similarly, I have found in the diary of Maurice Paléologue, the French ambassador to Russia at the time of the revolution of 1917, constant comparisons with the French Revolution. The other conception of the lessons of history is of course the reminder of a constant in man’s behaviour.

<sup>2</sup> Except in one category: military historians. Not enough emphasis is given to the degree to which military history always plays a determining part with regard to those who study strategy and tactics (and whose conclusions consequently have a considerable impact on the basic decisions relating to the existence of their own country). This again is a paradox, but one which is quite likely to attribute to the “lessons of history” an exceptional validity.

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no effort to demonstrate the social usefulness of their discipline, and that this can be explained by the fact that until quite recently nobody disputed this usefulness.

But the situation has changed, or, to be more precise, the “services” which the historian traditionally supplied are no longer in great demand. Except in the case of young countries which desperately try to find a past so as to present a more worthy foundation for their right to exist,<sup>3</sup> nationalism—even if latently powerful<sup>4</sup>—is no longer openly very popular.<sup>5</sup> The general scepticism which prevails around the legitimacy of everything which claims its place in tradition—and which finds its radical expression in contestation—is also turning against a whole complex of concepts (patriotism, national feeling, and human solidarity stopping at national frontiers) which the historian found it his mission to develop by tradition.

And as for history as a statesman’s philosophy, this more or less went out of existence with the era in which politicians were being recruited from a clearly defined social stratum. History has more or less lost its credit with this breed of technocrats, trade unionists and financiers who are the people of today who determine collective motives. They refer rather to statisticians, sociologists, economists, and more and more to the computer.

In short, it is no longer reckoned that history is a source which produces social services which have for many centuries secured it a comfortable position.

Historians have taken their time in realising this. But this is quite natural: all human groups develop patterns of habit. The habits of historians are very old—as old as the functions they

<sup>3</sup> Everyone knows that the African States, where possible, take on the name of a former African state. We also know recent Chinese historiography successfully—in my view—emphasises the incidence of revolutionary recurrence in the Chinese past. Of course, China is not a new country, but it is a country which, by revolutionising its social and political situation, must normally speaking be moved to underline the revolutionary aspects of its past so as to oppose the force of tradition—which acts against the regime—with the force of revolutionary legitimacy with its roots wedged deeply in the past.

<sup>4</sup> Including provincial nationalism. I am thinking here of the whole re-emergence of southern nationalism which broke out in France at the time of the 7th centenary of the suppression of the Albigeois.

<sup>5</sup> Which is partly explained by the exaltation of racism of not so long ago and by the awakening of an unsteady and hesitant feeling of belonging to Europe.

fulfilled. Although they themselves should have had their professional suspicions, historians have behaved like any other person: they have continued to consider that what was no more than a see-saw of several centuries' duration was a tangible social reality. Furthermore, history was only dimly aware of having been a servant. It prefers to flatter itself for communicating intellectual values for which mankind cannot fail to be deeply indebted to it. Thus it did not ask itself in real sense about what it was communicating in a concrete context, nor about the way in which its communications are integrated into social life.

In addition to this there is another reason in the context of very recent periods of time: in the course of the last century the historical world was shaken by a real intellectual revolution: narrative, moralist and literary, history has always wanted to become the explainer of social development. Thus it underwent dramatic transformation. For the reasons given earlier (the services which were traditionally expected of it), history up to the 19th century (Voltaire excepted) was only concerned with political, military, diplomatic and religious facts, and the accent was strongly placed on the role of "great men" (sovereigns, statesmen, generals, diplomats, church dignitaries, orators). What the historian aimed at was to construct models of behaviour to be admired and copied. Virtue, piety, courage and skill were given full coverage, and it is the practice of these qualities to an elevated degree by great men which explains the movement of collectivities, peoples, masses and crowds. Apart from great men there is one other driving force: God. This is evident from a long line of writings about history, from St. Augustine to Bossuet.

In this setting the behaviour of the people is clearly passive: the people can be excited, involved, convinced or crushed by the great man. The people has no autonomous role left to it. With Romanticism, and quickly followed by Marxism, all this starts to change: henceforth history is seen as a clash between anonymous masses, peoples or classes. It should be noted that this idea was not initially proposed by historians. Herder and Thierry and Marx were not professional historians. These men, it is true, were at the same time in the throes of a technical revolution: together with Ranke they reached the conception of a history based on sources and the critique of these sources, a history

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keen to reconstruct the past in its reality (incidentally an extremely ambiguous formula: which past is in question?... but that is another story...). And at the same time as well positivism was trying to make the social sciences into “true” sciences by introducing laws.

Thus the first half of the 19th century dealt with fundamental elements which were to end up by transforming the appearance of the science of history: sources and their critiques, masses, and laws.

This whole process then occupies and progressively swells in the last thirty years of the 19th century—with Schmoller and Lamprecht to start with—and eventually produces a new type of historian and a new conception of history.

What are the characteristics of this new generation of historians? They are evidently dedicated to the new technical conceptions, and in addition they see history as the result of massive and anonymous forces, which signifies an integration with the political facts of social, economic and cultural elements. To put it another way, the statement is no longer made up of a succession of events inter-connected by the interventions of great men, but events seen as the product of the thrust of anonymous forces. In other words, it was necessary to mark the relation between factors of movements and collective behaviour patterns. History becomes the explanation of the development of collectivities by the action of different forces.

This is not all: by an easily comprehensible shift, one soon reaches the point of constructing what present-day economists call models which, starting with a well studied case, represent a typical and recurrent series of inter-reactions—e.g. Pirenne’s theory of the origin of towns. In this way we are very soon dealing with the study of recurrence. Of course, recurrence was nothing new: as we have seen, Thucydides accepts it and in his wake so do the host of historians who dispense political science. The difference lies in the fact that in the latter case we are concerned with the recurrence of individual behaviour as applied to “great men.” The type of recurrence which the new school of historians tries to determine is the recurrence in the effect of an anonymous force on a collective pattern of behaviour. In this light, recurrences are the fruit of complicated inter-reactions which in the same sense motivate complexes living in more or

less identical contexts. For Pirenne, by way of example, the complex of merchant dynasties of a given period will undergo the same plan of socio-economic evolution.

It is clear that in such cases, when one wants to go beyond the simple statement and dismantle the mechanisms which guide a collectivity from a former state to a later state, a host of factors arise which are unequal, variable and moveable. To reconstruct the model while weighing up each element becomes no easy task. Historians of this generation have tended to underestimate this task, and it is furthermore this underestimation which explains why they believe so easily in historical laws.

This can be understood by an analysis of Pirenne's work,<sup>6</sup> which was strongly influenced by Schmoller and Lamprecht. His work covered a great many fields. Let us consider three: the history of Belgium, the origin of towns, and the origin of the Middle Ages (i.e., "Mahomet and Charlemagne"). To take the first point first, the birth of a kingdom called Belgium was (for Pirenne) written in advance in the facts, and more exactly in the existence of populations living on the brink of the Roman and Germanic civilisations along large rivers and on the coast. Towns? To begin with one finds the rebirth of important international commerce. Mahomet and Charlemagne? This signifies the interruption by the Moslems of relations between East and West.

Thus at the outset we find a massive and in some degree objective phenomenon which is alien to what is to follow. But this phenomenon has an irresistible influence on populations in a determined geographical sphere, on the economy, on politics, society, civilisation and institutions. The upsurge of commerce causes the emergence of a class of merchants on the move but in search of security, who settle in favourable sites on which an "urban" civilisation is born. The occupation of the Mediterranean by the Moslems causes a class of merchants to dwindle away, provokes a twist of the economy towards agriculture and gives rise to a class of landowners.

Throughout this process there are no "great and historic figures" as driving forces, but there are forces, and social groups,

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. Dhondt "Henri Pirenne, historien des institutions urbaines", *Annali della Fondazione italiana per la storia amministrativa*, vol. 3, 1966, pp. 81-129.



and motives and economic effects. Much discussion has been devoted to deciding whether Pirenne embodies a determinism. There is no doubt that, for Pirenne, there are in history the necessary and sufficient conditions. Does this mean that when the conditions offer themselves the phenomenon must *per force* be released? I do not believe that Pirenne ever asked himself this question, but it is easy to see, by way of his polemics, that in his eyes his theses have an absolute value, which is to say that the elements of the model (in the town theory) must be linked together and that no other situation (no other possibility of a town being born) is admitted.

And this point must be added: Pirenne conceives these theses on the origin of towns at the beginning of his career as a historian, but he develops them—still in the direction of greater precision—over a period of many years. Now, during these same years, he develops other conceptions which, for him, are clearly “laws”—in particular his conceptions about the evolution of capitalism and the way in which freedom and coercive regimes alternate.

It is therefore possible to see in Pirenne a very pure exponent of the historical moment under discussion here: the historian between the years 1880 and 1914.

And Pirenne was far from being the only man to embody these concepts of history as a science of the recurrent, of the model, of the study of anonymous forces, and, lastly, of historical laws. We already know that he issued from Schmoller and Lamprecht, but the huge success of his work clearly proves that he was part of a movement in full swing. In order to fully grasp this, one must not just cling to the leaders. At the University of Ghent Pirenne had a colleague some years junior to himself, one Hubert van Houtte. Van Houtte had not been formed by Pirenne, he came from the notoriously rebellious University of Louvain which at the time was quite opposed to the new tendencies. His relations with Pirenne were never very good. It is all the more remarkable to see Van Houtte travel to Leipzig to study under Lamprecht and return deeply convinced not only by the study of recurrence but also by the study of historical laws, a conception to which he remained faithful for half a century.

The current which took a hold in the early historiography around 1900 thus went in the direction of a certain determinism

which was expressed in the study of laws of social behaviour, or, more accurately expressed, of the effects of certain factors on this behaviour. And one can legitimately go further than this and ask oneself about the historian of the 1900s: he is a man, an intellectual, and also more often than not a person who is very involved in the collectivity. It is hardly conceivable that one should spend one's days trying to elucidate the motives of the collective activity of past mankind without also asking oneself about the motives within one's own times. This is true even for scholars who study the most abstract of problems—one only has to think of Einstein. And how much more true must this be of the historian. And the question I would ask is this: to what extent did these historians—the first and vibrant generation of a collectivity who recognised that their mission was to *explain* the laws of human evolution—believe, either consciously or unconsciously, with Comte (that) “The doctrine which sufficiently explains the complex whole of the past will inevitably preside over the future as a result of this single test?” Marrou<sup>7</sup> calls this assertion naive. But he does not strike out at its very essence. He simply underlines how incomplete the sources are and therefore how incomplete our analyses of the motive factors are.

But to be fair the historians whom we are talking of here did not realise these deficiencies. This is precisely what explains the swift obsolescence of their systems. But they did believe in the validity of their construction. They believed in it, and people believed in it. At that time history was considered the queen of the human sciences. Non-historians believed in history. And so did the historians of the time too, it would appear. This sort of mentality could only develop the propensity for formulating their statements in human laws. It is quite probable that they believed they held the key to human evolution.

It is clear—and here Marrou is certainly right—that these models, recurrences and historical laws proposed by historians at the turn of the century did not hold much weight. This is easy to see if one limits oneself to the rather narrow sector in which Pirenne operated. And how much truer this was in the case of more general “laws.” Suffice it to consider how many

<sup>7</sup> *L'histoire et ses méthodes*, 1961, p. 1477.

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justified criticisms have been agitated by Lamprecht's publications!

And yet this new scientific history, intended to be the explanation of universal human evolution which was widely integrated in economics, sociology and collective psychology, constituted, within the intellectual context of 1900, all that the human sciences were offering in the most dynamic and promising sense.

The 1914-18 war brought an abrupt end to all this, in several ways. First of all on the human plane: on the eve of 1914 an international community of scholars was establishing itself. In 1914 they turned out to be ferociously nationalistic. Laviss's behaviour is eloquent, but one can easily find examples of similar behaviour from both Germans and Austrians.

The fact that this collectivity of scholars was shattered could have been purely accidental, but worse was to come. After 1918 one finds no trace of this historian's conviction that he holds the key to human behaviour. Thus something absolutely fundamental was shattered by the war. It is not hard to pinpoint: never before had there been such massacre and destruction. Never before had there been such total lack of humanity in collective patterns of behaviour. Faced with this reality, not much could remain of the optimistic creed developed by historians who were part of a reasonable, and thus intelligible, mankind. There were now strong reasons why the secret dream of discovering the laws of human conduct now appeared laughable and Utopian. The dream was thus rejected.<sup>8</sup>

This cannot, however, be emphasised too strongly: on the eve of the first world war, a generation of historians held the belief—at least among the intellectual avant-garde—that history was the study of recurrences and the basis of laws of human conduct. We must emphatically remind ourselves of this, because the subsequent generation of historians—which is still active and

<sup>8</sup> It would be dishonest to pass over an aspect which is in some senses ideological: it is quite clear that a more or less wholehearted and conscious approval of historical materialism lies at the basis of the historical conceptions of the dominant generation around the turn of this century. There is no point in repeating that this historical materialism constituted the basis of the ideology of the parties who took or tried to take power after 1917. We know that the way in which the Soviets took power in Russia provoked a violent anti-soviet feeling in Western and Central Europe. One cannot really believe that the way in which western historians—normally bourgeois in origin—abandoned the conceptions which ruled them before 1914, had absolutely nothing to do with the harshly underlined ideological coloration of historical materialism.

influential thanks to our gerontocratic system—rejects this concept so outrightly that it tends to obliterate the reality of the 1900s.

In fact, after 1918 the historian, soundly thrashed, devotes himself to the study of the “historical fact in its uniqueness.” The certainties of erudition become a refuge, the technique is perfected, but history as practised at that time forbids itself any reference to the general or the fundamental, or even to the present. One returns to the simplistic causal explanation of “cause (antecedent) and effect (subsequent),” the two being linked in the explanation by an extremely banal proposition or motivation.<sup>9</sup> One can find this in the majority of the great collected works which started to be published at this time,<sup>10</sup> and which are admirable catalogues of isolated facts, but nothing more than this, and therefore more or less illegible for the non-professional. Is it not a striking fact that, at far as I see it, one cannot find a single line devoted to explanatory possibilities or to the question of recurrence in the whole 758 pages, the 38 national studies, the two volumes of “Histoire et historiens depuis cinquante ans” published in 1927 by the *Revue Historique*? And yet with what ecstasy, on the other hand, have the texts and bibliographies been edited!

What history at that time had become to the outside world in these years is well illustrated by a sentence from G. Friedman: “The historians seemed to us to have fled all thought about the means and ends of their discipline and we detested their introverted withdrawal which they made into a sort of sad pavilion.”<sup>11</sup>

Certainly this intellectual attitude was not general—without it the awakening would not have been so rapid—but it was sufficiently widespread and sufficiently influential to make its

<sup>9</sup> This is how Gordon H. McNeill (*Essays in Modern European Historiography*) Chicago, 1970, pp. 368-9) describes Seignobos' method: “...he avoided favoring any particular theory in causation, and when he wrote history he either gave the simplest and most immediate cause for an event, or more often than not, left it unexplained. All of which is in the best tradition of recent historiography.”

<sup>10</sup> And which remained as reference works for a whole generation of historians. Namely, *L'Histoire du monde* in twelve volumes (Cavaignac), *L'Histoire Générale* (Glotz), and the series *Peuples et Civilisations* (Halphen & Sagnac).

<sup>11</sup> *Annales*, 1957, p. 4.

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effects felt right up to the present time, and to have disastrous consequences on the consideration which was previously given to history.

And even today, a large part of the generation of historians who were born particularly in the 25 years before the war considers (but somewhat less absolutely than formerly)<sup>12</sup> that the sole aim of history is to determine the historical fact in its total uniqueness, and that there is every cause to abstain from any intellectual excursion which goes beyond this objective.

The historian of the 20s thus renounces any study of the deep roots of human evolution. He deals with the simple and unique fact.

This conception has had decisive consequences on the credit and worthiness accorded to history by public opinion.

It is quite futile here to underline the fact that the years between the wars (and the subsequent years too, of course) constitute a phase of truly amazing acceleration in the history of the world: everything develops at a giddy speed and on an inordinate scale: technology, economics, politics and so on...

Western man of this era finds himself on a mental plane which is at once over-evolved—and therefore unable to undergo this landslide passively—and insufficiently formed—and therefore unable to grasp even a vague explanation. In rapid succession he is subjected to mental shocks which completely bewilder him. How could one avoid losing one's footing when faced with the post-war period, revolution and fascism, the great economic crisis and the crazy fluctuations of currencies! All this concerns him directly, in his everyday life. Now, the human mind is driven to try to understand. Man certainly was never before in such desperate need of clarification as he was in these two decades. But where to find it?

The human sciences were created to allow man to understand his human environment, and on the eve of 1914, history was the queen of the human sciences; history was the science which explained social evolution by definition. In the chaos of the 1920s it was therefore to history that men turned above all. I think this was what happened: this would certainly explain that it was

<sup>12</sup> It is easy to reveal among the recent works of these historians what one might call a salute to the most recent conceptions.

precisely in these years that the great general histories were drawn up. But these histories do not bring men what they are trying to find: history renounces, history withdraws: history no longer believes in its mission.

The consequence of this—which still makes itself felt today—is that there was a rupture between the historian and the man in search of enlightenment about his contexts. Very swiftly those disciplines which formerly went hand in glove with history backed away to affirm their own autonomous vocation—explanation in terms of sociology, economics, psychology and ethnology... New disciplines of the human collective spring up: anthropology, politicology, polemology... The science of man the social being is fragmented. Now, all these disciplines share the common denominator of aiming at the normative: they apply themselves to the task of determining laws, norms, structures, models. By definition they deny the uniqueness of the human fact. They postulate homogeneity—at least a certain level of homogeneity—in human behaviour. Each one in its own field thus aims to show man which are the norms of his behaviour, the fundamental structures of his society, the habitual mechanisms, alternations and correlations... In short they give man, hungry for certainties, the assurance that what is human can be defined and grasped by the mind: measured, accounted for, and reconstituted in complexes with intelligible and demonstrable structures. It is this that pre-1914 historians had tried to apprehend in the course of time, and this that post-1918 historians refused to envisage.

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History has never recovered from this rupture with the man in search of intellectual succour. Its social credit has tumbled. Dictators, of course, will invoke history, but not as a science of man: only as a pretext for nationalistic excesses. Apart from this function, leaders of men will not grant it any great importance. The ordinary man reads a great deal of history, but history which has become a source of distraction: the scandals of the past and minor history constitute the complement to present scandals which are so well reported by the daily press. Henceforth there are two histories: history written by historians for historians, and the historical, sensational or amusing

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history, the only “historic” genre left which will still excite the interest of the profane. What does survive, however—because mental customs are tenacious—is the widespread belief in men in the “lessons of history,” the “laws of history” indeed. But this slight asset of corroded confidence in history which has survived<sup>13</sup> provokes from the historian no more than a condescending smile.

For this generation, history is art for art’s sake. While philosophy, which was the queen of science until its fall from grace in the 19th century, is reborn and powerfully penetrates society, and while a whole host of human sciences herald themselves as the normative sciences of society, history, alone and aloof, proclaims itself the science of the gratuitous.

The period of historical defeatism has not been a long one. The reaction has arrived.

We are of course talking about what is conveniently called the “Revolution of History,” but this movement, which, if linked with the appearance of the *Annals* of economic and social history, got under way in 1929 and was unleashed by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, only expresses a part of the historical movement as it has developed since this date.

And first and foremost there is the question of the historical institution: historians dedicated to gratuitous history, history for history’s sake, who were educated between 1918 and 1929 did not fade away after this date. On the contrary, due to the gerontocratic set-up of intellectual society, they normally progressed to influential positions, all the more easily because they received the support of those who had never abandoned the old concept of political and institutional history, and of those who had repented. In conclusion, hitherto, or until quite recently, the traditional conceptions of history put up a solid front, a fact which, from without, involved a persistent ambiguity. This ambiguity was all the more irksome because historians had at the same time been attacked by the new human disciplines which were trying to carve for themselves a part in the study of social

<sup>13</sup> Not long ago I had proof of this: the Minister of Education in Belgium is trying to suppress the teaching of history at the secondary level. This has provoked various reactions, different people, chosen at random, have been interviewed on the radio. It is surprising to see how all of them—if I am not mistaken—deplored the disappearance of history.

and human being. It is in this complex context that a growing minority of historians started to try and rethink history.

In what direction? In a very general sense it can be said that there was a swing towards the movement which had been subdued by the first world war. An indication of this is the very considerable admiration in which Pirenne was held by the founders of the new movement. In a more concrete sense, the new historical conceptions issued from certain ideas which were having the finishing touches put to them.

In the first place the object of history was to study man living within a society. It was clearly not a question of a static description, but the study of development. This in turn postulated a study of the factors of collective movement. Throughout the world the aim was to render intelligible, in as complete a way as possible, the evolution of mankind, considered first of all at the level of concrete human societies.

Practically speaking, this supposed an immense heuristic effort: everything becomes a factor of movement (everything, that is, written on parchment, but also everything written into the earth and blood). Everyone knows how Bloch renovated agrarian history, and that Febvre wrote *La Terre et l'évolution humaine*, and that one of the most recent parts of the *Annales* is devoted to "Biology and History."

Inevitably, therefore, one reaches the point of looking for the general factors which influence the development not only of one, but of several and possibly all societies. A good example of this are the studies by Leroy-Ladurie on climate.

It is fatal that all this ends up by transforming the technique of the historian and his basic assumptions.

With increasing audacity (but one which is scarcely more than an echo outside its own world) history is once more laying claim to the function of a synthetic science which concerns everything that relates to social man, a science whose vocation is to dismantle the machinery of the development of mankind. History wants to answer all the whys, and explain every collective development.

In a concrete sense what does all this mean?

A word first and foremost about the framework. In the last half-century the historian has witnessed the powerful impetus of the social sciences and even of other human sciences—e.g. linguistics. What all these sciences have in common is that beyond the



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moving, superficial data, they are striving to determine durable or fundamental structures and a book of rules, norms or laws. The techniques used consist of tracking down, grouping and accounting for identical or recurrent elements, of determining, often by mathematics, the laws which govern the action of those elements which constitute its field. Recurrences, quantification, models, structures and laws are the predominant aspects of the social sciences.

Historians who are part of the new tendency—perhaps impressed by the considerable esteem and audience of specialists in the social sciences—have a very marked leaning to have themselves received among the social sciences. This is expressed by the most pressurised reconciliation possible with the characteristic methods of the social sciences. Nothing is more conspicuous than the basic drift of historians towards the use of the computer, a fact which emerged again in 1970 at the world congresses in Leningrad and Moscow.

But to what extent can this desire to be integrated with the social sciences be gratified? This is the heart of our problem.

Every science has a field. History is clearly the study of man around the world, in the past, and man, in this sense, can only be conceived of as a social being: Robinson Crusoe, on his island, took with him a vast mental and intellectual context (technical too, and a host of others) which he had acquired from his previous existence in society. History, therefore, tries to be a science of man in society throughout the ages. But science means method. Historical criticism can no longer constitute the whole method; it fixes the rules of historical work, not the direction of research, nor even the manner in which the established elements will be put to work. Since history wants to be a social science, it is going to have to complete its method by borrowing methods—or certain methods—from the classical social sciences. This means that we shall have to turn our back on isolated historical behaviour—which is suspect of being accidental, and thus non-significative—and focus exclusively on the recurrent fact. This latter can in fact be put in series, it can be computed, and its frequency or intensity can be measured. Not so very long ago a historian<sup>14</sup> (who by the way opposes the view put forward here)

<sup>14</sup> Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, 1971.

drew attention to the fact that one of Louis XIV's colds would have been included by classical history in a study of this monarch's reign, whereas, now, it would be of considerably greater usefulness among a series of elements dealing with the state of sanitation in France at the turn of the 18th century.

In short, on the primary level, facts are only of interest to historians now if they can be grouped in series, whether it is a question of behaviour which appears recurrently in the sources, or whether these facts are, by definition, part of a series (the history of prices, for example, all statistical data).

The establishment of analagous or homogenous series of elements can, of course, only be a first step, but it is a decisive step for the orientation of historical work: by stressing recurrence and series, one has excluded, or perhaps better, degraded a whole host of directions in research or ways of explanation: purely event-orientated history, simple narrative, the account of successive political facts which are limited to superficiality. On the contrary, pride of place is given to whatever is quantifiable, and likely to invite calculated correlation.

In reality, we are far from the point at which everything is quantifiable, or when all the correlations can be calculated. On the contrary, it is often possible to balance, that is, to concede a co-efficient of mass or importance to an element in a particular context. Practically speaking, this is what is often resolved upon, and the result is the same again when the emphasis is laid on the collective, the group or the frequency.

But more is needed: the history of man in society can only be the history of a movement or movements, and from this basis it is necessary to seek out not only the recurrent patterns of behaviour but also the factors of this movement. These factors can also be series of human behaviour (for example, a systematically maintained and organised agitation), but quite often they are different elements, e.g. the size of the harvest, an epidemic, or some technical innovation.

Every precedent can be found in the sources; hitherto the problem is basically one of heuristics and criticism. But the situation changes at the next level: it is a question of setting up guaranteed relations between the factors of the "movement" and the new patterns of behaviour. Now, at this point the sources are no longer any use. It is quite possible to find, in

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written documents, an explanation of the movement by reference to a special or general "cause," but this does not help us either, because we have no means of evaluating the credence due to the author of the source in question. Normally no contemporary witness of an event can go as far as the sense of the development, so briefly mentioned. It is very doubtful both whether he can know all the elements and whether he can balance them: only the future (i.e. the later historian) has a reasonable chance of doing this. In the practical sense, the causal explanation of a movement given by a contemporary witness is superficial.

Consequently the doubtless essential function of the historian consists precisely in introducing, in his account, the link between the factors of a movement and patterns of behaviour.

This was the recognised task of the classical historian. Working with facts which were "specific in their uniqueness," he nevertheless had to interconnect these facts because they are "spread over years" and therefore successive, and successive in an order which does not offend logic or the most current tests. Because classical history is first and foremost political history, the "driving forces" are usually individuals or very vague complexes (the people, or the masses). The "motivation" issues from stereotype elements borrowed from psychology: the arrogance or thirst for power of the prince, the fickleness of the masses, the rapacity of the merchants, the subtlety of the statesman. This results in an account which is more a puppet theatre, because the historian is in charge of the strings. It teaches us nothing about man in society and his conduct.

But how can one avoid this? The absolute problem is to connect factors of movements and recurrent patterns of behaviour by the true process, so as to obtain an original sequence, a reflection of what is really produced, which is consequently able to give us a clearer understanding of the general, normal conduct of man in society. In the reality of present historiography, we have not yet reached this point—we shall return to this aspect. What we are trying to do is to show which factors of movements and which modifications in the collective behaviour are closely linked in a recurrent sense.

One can set about this in various ways. One is to borrow the statements of present-day social sciences—sociology, economy—and to suppose—as a working hypothesis—that there is a link

between the factors (driving forces on the one hand, and collective patterns of behaviour on the other) which crop up in the sources. It is clear that in so doing one is not really adding to our knowledge of behaviour, except inasmuch as one can suggest similarities between contemporary reactions and reactions in previous societies.

The second technique consists in establishing correlations by studying the greatest possible number of similar cases (the closely linked phenomenon of the same driving elements and the same patterns of behaviour). The classical example is the one of the connection between expensive corn and social agitation: here there is no need to borrow any plans from the social sciences: for the last four centuries (not to mention others in which the documentation is less complete) history has overflowed with examples of bad crops and collective reaction, and with so many variants that one can draw up any comparison one wants.

The third possibility is that of the privileged situation of the sources.

It is futile to stress how dependent the historian is upon his sources, but the ordinary person does not easily realise to what extent this is true. The reason is that this person usually has access to an account in which the historian has used all his ingenuity to overcome the incompleteness of the sources. One does come across works in which the historian indicates that some doubt does exist, or that two alternative solutions are possible. But one seldom finds works in which the historian confesses that the development, as proposed by him, relies on poor sources or that the presentation of the facts is very haphazard. It is not that the historian wants to mislead his reader: he has truly extracted everything that there was to extract from the sources and he reckons therefore that his job is done. But if this may satisfy the historian of the classical school, who aims purely and simply at giving the most exact account *possible*, without undue concern for the existing level of uncertainty, such results remain well below what is needed to increase our original knowledge of patterns of behaviour in general. The opposite, however, is also true: for certain events, the state of the sources is so good that the results attain a high degree of probability. *Mutatis mutandis* this is the whole difference between the significative and non-significative elements in statistics. But

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it is, at this point, not necessarily a case of statistical data: I have in mind, for example, the “Récit du Meurtre de Charles le Bon” in which a clerk from Bruges recounts, day by day, the murder of a Flemish count in 1127, and its consequences. This source is without doubt the most important in the whole of the 12th century, not only for various aspects of social movements, but also for the history of the “mediaeval” mentality. The diary-like character of this source allows us, in effect, to follow the stages of the inner conflict of a man who believes that God rules over men in accordance with the rules of justice, and who discovers progressively that this is not so.<sup>15</sup>

So much for the 12th century, but there is no point in saying that the 18th and 19th centuries are favoured by the abundance and wealth of information<sup>16</sup> and that, in certain cases, it is possible to determine—by counter-proof and comparison—the impact of factors on human behavioural patterns, and with such precision that one can chance it and construct models, or, on another plane, types (the militant socialist for example).<sup>17</sup> These models and types composed in contexts in which the material is the most satisfactory can serve as a working hypothesis in similar research carried out in fields where the sources are less helpful.

From the above it follows that in the reasoning of the modern historian one finds the admission—either implicitly or explicitly—of the concept of recurrent relations between certain factors of

<sup>15</sup> J. Dhondt, “Une mentalité du 12e siècle: Galbert de Bruges,” *Revue du Nord*, 1957, pp. 101-109.

<sup>16</sup> An example: I have been in a position to understand how the reports made by every lower-ranking commander of a unit in the army on every successive hierarchical level enable one to reconstruct with extraordinary detail the whole range of behavioural patterns in a battle—when these documents are preserved, of course.

<sup>17</sup> Until very recently, the history of working-class movements was presented almost exclusively as a history of ideology on the one hand, or a history of the management structure. It is pointless to say that the basic militant only has a very rudimentary knowledge of ideology, and that the instructions given to basic militants by the management are applied, in accordance with concrete contexts, in a form in which very little remains of the original intentions. Thus the working-class movement is only comprehensible when studied with this basic militant as the point of departure. This is what people seem to have begun to realise (spasmodically) at the conference in Paris in 1964 about the first international (*La Première Internationale*, Paris 1964, Paris 1968, pp. 495 ff.).

movement and certain collective behaviour. Each case studied is specific in the sense that it belongs to a precise environment and moment; but it is conceived as representative of a sequence whose plan occurs several times in time and space, just as each and every voice belongs to a person, but there are types (tenor, baritone) which are so defined and interchangeable that the director knows the parts which can be sung by any tenor or any baritone.

In reality things are not this simple, but we shall deal with this later on. What must be grasped at this juncture is that one cannot reasonably dispute the existence of recurrent sequences.

And from this a further problem arises: given that history is the study of the recurrent, how far can one push this statement? Can one go as far as the "historical law," dream of historians a century ago, and consequently as far as the "lesson" of history so readily invoked by non-historians? To what extent can history extend to a definition of the rules which might themselves contain an *actual* process in evolution and thus disclose the future. Can one make a comparison between the validity of the rules of physics and the validity of the recurrences contained in history? It is easy to show where the difference lies: the validity of the laws of physics does not result so much from the fact that they can be controlled at any given moment by an experiment as from the reason for this possibility. This resides in the perfect homogeneity of the matter which makes up the field of physics. The result is that any sample or specimen of a physical element will react in the same way and that, if by chance one only had a tiny quantity of a physical element, it would still be possible to determine once and for all the laws of its behaviour under such and such a condition. In other words, it is in no way necessary to have access to a large part of this substance in order to determine its characteristics, and thus its behaviour.

This same basic homogeneity explains the possibility of determining the laws in fields such as astronomy or geology, where there is no question of reproducing, on demand, a phenomenon for verification.

It is evident that there can only be absolute laws in a completely homogenous field and for this reason there cannot be intangible historical laws, in the physical sense, in history.

It is not so much the non-homogeneity of the substance of

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history which is in question, as the impossibility of proving this homogeneity. History is the science of man in society, and this man in society is a biological being, and inasmuch homogenous. As such he belongs to a much larger class than mankind alone. Every biological man is subject to the same biological laws, many of which extend to mammals. Can one postulate that the impact of the biological on social behaviour is so determining that "social man" constitutes, in time and space, a homogenous substance? This is a rhetorical question, because the problem in all this is one of definition. Every man eats, and to meet this basic everyday need man set up societies. Is one to put the emphasis on what all these societies have in common (all known human societies are organisations in which the common raw product is inequally shared out in accordance with the norms which admit a favoured group and a large non-favoured group) or on the differences (the enormous cleavages in societies living with passive, agricultural economies, industrial societies, or more limited groups, eastern empires, the Greek city state, etc.). I do not see how one can make this decision definitively at present, and thus the problem of the homogeneity of historical matter remains insoluble. Practically speaking, everyone will tackle it on the basis of *a priori*s.

This is serious because history differentiates itself awkwardly from all the other sciences by the fact that the majority of its matter is never accessible to it: the past depends on the sources, and the existing sources represent an invisible layer of dust, as it were, over patterns of human behaviour; and there are only slightly substantial sources on behaviour for a tiny fraction of the past. It is therefore clear that for these two reasons together (uncertainty over the homogeneity, and inaccessibility of the greater part of the matter) it is out of the question to define "historical laws" in the same way as physical laws.

But is not the objection too theoretical? Is not physics also constantly working towards the ultimate composition of matter? Do not the laws that it blazons apply solely to that part of the matter which it has managed to penetrate?—and yet they are still laws... Is it not therefore possible that history, the science of man in society, should restrict itself modestly to studying the "laws" in the sources for those centuries in which the documentation on behaviour is generally plentiful? Now, a certain

number of "historical laws" have been proposed. Perhaps the first thing to do is to make a thorough examination of this concept.

In a certain number of cases the issue is one of great hypotheses which claim to explain very broad patterns of collective human behaviour. Thus Toynbee's thesis on the origin of civilisations, thus the class struggle as the driving force in history (i.e. of the collective movement of human societies). Into this category one can also introduce the often confirmed theses of geopolitics.

In all three cases we are faced with very general laws in the sense that they are proposed as being valid for very diverse societies. Furthermore they are of the "provocation-reaction" type. Their authors imbue them with a universal validity, thus making them deterministic.

There are also more "modest" historical laws, in the sense that they are only proposed as valid within a single society, that is, in a homogenous environment. An example of this is Pirenne's law of the evolution of capitalism. Here again it is a question of a law for the collective behaviour of a group, and, in fact, of a law of causality. It is obvious that this is presented implicitly as a determinism.

This of course is what troubles and scares today's historians, and it is important to find out why. There are different reasons for this historians' attitude. This is the first.

When one considers the "great historical laws" which have been proposed—by Toynbee for example—one finds that they are laws in general about human behaviour which are valid for the most widely differing societies, and especially for societies about which we have very little information. For these reasons their intrinsic validity cannot be verified: this is regarded as part of their general character. Now, a general law for mankind can only be admitted by those who admit the basic homogeneity of human behaviour, but this homogeneity could only be established if there were general laws.

This objection does not run against those laws which are proposed as valid only in a homogenous society, but here another intellectual obstacle emerges: we are dealing with the fact that human history has no end, which presents a total barrier when it comes to proving any sort of determinism. Even if one could prove the same motive power effect sequence ten times running,



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one would still not have proved that the same sequence would hold good the eleventh time; here history which is based on the past is the victim of its own open future: history is only a part of something which is "to be continued" and for this it will never be possible to demonstrate any law which implies indefinite repetition.

But this objection is not entirely reasonable: if one finds that a given pattern of human behaviour (i.e. a constant collective reaction to the same factors) has always been established, one would not be running any real risk if one considered it probable that the same would recur, if not for all time, at least for a great deal of it.

And here one is up against another difficulty, whose nature is very different. Since the time when history—as a purely narrative and model-based discipline—decided to become a science which would explain collective human movements, it has been studying the driving elements in order to show which are the collective patterns of behaviour produced under the impact of these driving forces. The progress scored by the present school compared with the previous school lies in the way it has investigated and examined the concept of "factors of movements" with considerable success. *What it has conspicuously omitted to do is to establish the processes which lead from the driving force to behaviour*—in short the mechanisms. It is not for want of trying—the whole of quantitative history tries to connect a certain quantitative level (the rise of the price of corn, the appearance of gold) with certain consequences (social movements, political developments, pressure from a certain social group). But we have not got very far: one considers oneself very lucky if one unearths a coincidence of two phenomena in time (July 14th 1789 = the highest price of corn in the 18th century). Today the highest incidence of demonstration in history, of the action of a factor on a pattern of behaviour, is again a coincidence in time. But in practice coincidences are rarely as striking as this and, what is more, everyone knows that a pattern of behaviour (storming the Bastille for example) is not the effect of an isolated factor, nor is it the effect of any particular level of intensity of the "force" (thus of any particular rise in the price of corn). In other words the concatenation between certain driving elements and certain

patterns of behaviour is so complex that it is not altogether unreasonable to doubt that it can be found.

This doubt is corroborated by statements made in certain sectors common to contemporary situations and to themes of historical research. One direction of historical study which has been in favour for several years now is the formation of decisions. One starts from a clearly formulated decision made at a precise moment (the resignation of a government for example) and then concentrates on finding all the factors which culminate in this decision; one then makes a considered critique of these factors to establish which of them have been the most decisive. The difficulty of reaching a definite result from this sort of research is nevertheless proven by studies of the people responsible for making the *actual* decision. Here is what Alain Duhamel writes about Philippe d'Iribarne's book "La Science et le Prince" (Le Monde, March 30th 1971, p. 11). "The rational preparation of decisions constitutes, in effect, a theoretical progress. But it has its limits and its dangers. The bulk of Philippe d'Iribarne's book is devoted to this aspect. The limitations are evident. For the decision to be prepared under the right conditions, no important data must be neglected and it must be possible to evaluate all the basic dimensions of the problem. Nothing could be more difficult. Where does the chain of consequences stop? How does one evaluate the deterioration of a region, the destruction of a custom, the frustration of a man? And in tackling this question how far does one go? Is it possible to work out a plan to reorganise the transport systems of a metropolis without giving thought to the citizen's condition?"

What is the connection between the present problem and the problem of the past? The historian certainly has a huge advantage: he knows the "course of history" in relation to an event (here a decision) by placing himself at a given point in the past. Of course this is very important because the later development of events facilitates considerably the real consideration of the different factors which have become valid. On the other hand the historian is in an extremely prejudicial position as compared with the present-day technician: he is working, not with reality, but with sources. This means firstly that his information has absolute limits (the technician can make any investigation he considers necessary) and secondly that, as we have already said,

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the sources themselves never give us definite relations between the factors of a movement and patterns of behaviour: when they do give us this, the relations are those that the authors believe they have revealed, and we already know that the view of the contemporary with regard to his own times is essentially superficial.

All these elements listed above lead one to doubt that the historian can, *irrefutably*, establish relations between forces of movement and a change in collective patterns of behaviour.

On the other hand, in the day to day experience of the historian (and of any man) a whole host of aspects tend to contradict the concept of an inevitable chain of events.

First, there is the everyday experience. It is abundantly clear that the events which we witness appear totally confused, and that only that which belongs quite distinctly to the past can be contemplated with sufficient distance to be more or less intelligible. This is not enough to counterbalance the impact of the confusion which assails us each and every day in our examination of the collective patterns of behaviour which are ours.

Then there is the concept of chance in history. This is very probably a fallacy, but it is a striking one. One can see that it is impossible to prove the action of chance in history. When one invokes it (Poitiers a.d. 732, victory for the Franks or the Moslems), one suppresses, in the reasoning, all the reactions that the opposite hypothesis (victory for the Moslems, for example) would have obviously provoked. But one can only suggest these reactions, and this will always have less impact than the striking contrary hypothesis. Of course this does not mean that there is no chance in history, which is far too obvious. But it does mean that invoking the force of chance through a lengthy development in patterns of behaviour is and always will be a hypothesis and a stake which appeal to the mind: one cannot prove chance!

Next there is what is called the free arbiter, the action of deliberate choice by the individual and more particularly of the "great man." The reasoning is that these patterns of behaviour are outside conjecture and consequently outside what can be deduced from previous evolution. The actions of these "great men" might therefore have affected evolution (in itself probable) and from the moment that this is a possibility, no historical

recurrence can be considered a working hypothesis capable of explaining all the developments—even the essential ones—in a collectivity. One cannot deny that there are men whose action on a people steers this people in a different direction (different on the most varied levels) from that which previous evolution might have forecast; this is because these “great men” themselves react differently than the average man. In other words they behave differently to the norm when faced with enticements and dangers. This is so in the case of the saint, the hero and the madman—and by madman I in no way imply anything derogatory. Each one of us has had experience of cases of this kind. But the response remains the same: it is impossible to prove that the “great man” has, *for ever*, affected the patterns of behaviour of an important social group.

And then, of course, there is the fact that the very perceptible recurrence between certain forces and certain consequences is counterbalanced by the cases in which a similar force results in an opposite pattern of behaviour: at the moment the popular explanation of the French Revolution is the marked growth of industrial production, the commercial stratum and the bourgeois industrial class in France. My colleague Crayebeckx has shown that in the Austrian Netherlands (now Belgium) this development had been more advanced than in France, but this did not prevent a revolution in the opposite direction (The Brabançon Revolution) from taking place, in 1789.

This can be explained away of course, but, *prima facie*, a statement such as this discourages those who insist on the importance of recurrences. What remains, therefore, is a bundle of personal and everyday impressions which suggest that the influence of driving forces on collective patterns of behaviour is not always and not definitely compulsory.

The result of all this is that the historian hesitates when invited to admit the existence of recurrent sequence of forces and patterns of behaviour which are so evident that they can be made into laws.

Where does this lead us? To state the existence of certain recurrences (expensive corn/social tension, foreign occupation/national tenacity) which are undeniable, but whose level of compulsion cannot be determined (is it *always* or *often* like this). The historian could stop here, draw up the list of these recurrences

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and present them as plans capable of explaining—but not necessarily—a certain number of movements in human society.

Clearly one is not dealing with historical laws then. Nor is one trying to prove in each individual case that the recurrence invoked has any explanatory force.

Should one leave it at that?

This is a very serious question, because by holding to the reasoning just laid out is to dispute the whole real scientific value of history as a human science. It will end up as an account of the human past, stuffed full of various polite suggestions about the possibility of certain influences on human behaviour by a few factors.

Very different reasons urge us not to adopt this viewpoint.

Firstly, if history disappears as a science which explains the whole of human evolution, it will have no substitute. What differentiates history from the other human sciences is the fact that the latter are concerned with just a slice of man; therefore they draw up rules which only apply within a predefined system. This means that in their “laws,” by definition, one does not take into consideration a mass of elements (thus human factors) and that one cannot therefore adopt their conclusions about man without some reservations. In other words it is not enough to adopt or juxtapose their conclusions in order to understand human evolution.

Another reason is that, whatever the enormous imperfections of the historical sources may be, they alone can inform us directly about the behaviour of man down the ages, that is, in a dimension which extends in another direction from the sciences which study human behaviour purely and simply in the present society which is temporary and transitory. Should one stand aside and let this huge capital of knowledge about man disappear?

The thing that encourages the belief that there can be such things as absolute recurrences, and laws in history—or at least the belief that this hypothesis should not be rejected *a priori*—is the fact that all the other human sciences not only adopt this postulate, but set up as their essential objective the determination of correlations, recurrences, models, and structures which are generally valid—and thus the determination of laws in this same substance, man as a social being.

We have certainly shown above how history is at a disadvantage when compared with all these other sciences by the very nature of its material, but is this an invalidating factor? This too is not proven. One can ask oneself whether history appears too self-demanding compared with these other sciences, some of which show no hesitation in basing—with an authority which is intimidating but not necessarily convincing—plans and laws on a stock of material which, if subjected to the same criticism as history, might well appear to be singularly deficient.

In fact there is only one alternative: either human history is senseless (that is, it is made up of an infinity of deeds which are essentially independent from one another, in separate contexts, and which never move in any precise direction) or else the history of mankind entails a certain level of intelligibility, because most of the patterns of behaviour are mutually connected and broadly explicable by their contexts. This is the basic hypothesis of all the other human sciences. If it is adopted for history, one must automatically admit a high coefficient of recurrence which can be not only unearthed but proven. If one allows these premises, one will naturally end up by concluding that it is legitimate—as much from the restricted viewpoint of the social usefulness of historians as from the very general viewpoint of human science—to tend to study the recurrences in history and to reshape them in a form which demands acceptance.

The problem, therefore, is to prove this, or, conversely, to see why this has not been proved to date. I think the explanation should be sought in the still primitive character of historical technics. History endeavouring to be science is the history of the last century of research—that is, a century of researchers faced with the most taxing problem which exists in the human sciences: the complete explanation of all patterns of behaviour by the action of all kinds of forces. When considered, this impetus which lasted a century shows us an alternation of premature hopes and of discouragement, also premature in our eyes. There is no reason to abandon technics, but they need to be constantly re-thought in terms of an objective which needs to be constantly re-defined. Here we already have two positive results: the thorough investigation of the forces which act on human collectivities, and the rendering of the force/

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behaviour sequences more or less beyond dispute. The basic weakness which remains is at first sight the fact that the normative, absolute character of these sequences remains uncertain.

We have already said that human history is a concept of the future, and so the normative absolute character of these sequences can never be established: it is therefore useless to apply oneself to this. But there are less ambitious objectives which do not appear to be beyond reach.

Let us consider the theoretical problem posed, the basic difficulties, and the deficiencies in present technics.

The plan is very simple: we have the forces acting on a given human society, the collective patterns of behaviour which are the result, and the intermediate stage: the ways in which this movement from force to behaviour takes place. In this plan there is a wellknown term; the third one, obviously: patterns of behaviour. This term appears in the sources and ever since it has been the object which history has endeavoured to determine.

The difficulty which has hitherto made historians withdraw, intellectually, is the conviction that the driving elements are so manifold and variable that there is no chance of irrefutably establishing the relation between each one of these forces and patterns of behaviour.

But does this not make the problem posed too restricted? A collective pattern of behaviour (e.g. a massive approval of fascism) is in effect the consequence of a host of factors. But since it is a question of a collective reaction, that is, simultaneously (a period of months, or a limited number of years) within a given human group, it is a question of a collective reaction to a situation, that is, to a synthesis of factors. It is possible that each one of these factors might have been perceived first of all separately by each individual, but the individual ends up by reacting to the synthesis of a large number of factors.

Is it really difficult to reconstitute this synthetic situation? Is it, for example, difficult to reconstruct the material and psychological climate existing in Germany in the 1930s? The answer is obviously that it is very possible, if only because the expression of this climate—made up of date and behaviour patterns—can be found in the sources, no less. Practically speaking, this situation entails two groups of elements: firstly, what one

can call routine elements, and secondly the specific elements of a situation. The former are the forces which are valid in all known human societies (the need to eat, or the climate, for example) and the forces which are currently valid in the society we are studying (the forms of organisation of capitalist production, for example). The specific elements of a situation are, for example (taking the Nazi era) the sequels of the first world war and the concrete aspects assumed by the great economic crisis of 1929 and the existence of a national socialist party.

If one takes into account that one is not claiming that each individual reacts in the same way, but that we are dealing with the predominant pattern of behaviour, it becomes very clear that the first term of our equation—the synthesis of active forces entailed by the initial “situation”—is perfectly recognisable.

It is also easy to see that all the problems reside in the intermediate stage: how does the passage between the initial situation and the final pattern of behaviour come about, or in other terms, how will the initial synthesis (such as it exists in the consciousness of those who will react) influence the members of the society under scrutiny.

And when one poses the question in these terms, one is struck straightaway by a truth: historians have hardly devoted any study to this to date. It is the mechanisms which act between the moment of “force” and the moment of “behaviour” which have hardly been studied or established. To a very large extent the historian is still a prisoner of the old concept of “cause/reaction,” which is the same thing as the aged plan of narrative history in which any movement issued from a flick of the historian’s finger. In short, history is not concrete. In reality, a mass of factors intervene in the change,<sup>18</sup> e.g. the awareness of the action of a force, and the resistance to it, or the inherent slowness in man’s collective reactions,<sup>19</sup> the traditional, psy-

<sup>18</sup> Change itself is a concept which historians omit to study; they appear content to illustrate the point of departure and the final result. In reality, change in patterns of behaviour comes about with almost imperceptible shifts of course; these must be followed in order to reconstruct the real image. A technique for this has to be developed.

<sup>19</sup> Such slight consideration is given to the long period of time taken by social transformation—for example, capitalism. The time involved always runs



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chological brakes, the refusals, the impact of a mass of mental terms on the acceptance of the influence of a given force. In each case a study must be made of the concrete modalities of the change, each step, each human stage, inward or outward, conscious or not. Here I am referring to certain of Soboul's works on the French Revolution, in which the mechanism of the impact of a decision in a club is not put together until the moment when this decision results in a collective pattern of behaviour. Thus one should, in the most concrete and detailed way, undo the mechanisms which result in tangible behavioural patterns, but this is hardly ever done.

And it is hardly ever done because it is only possible in special cases. One must therefore apply oneself to these cases if one is to construct models.

These preferential fields must of necessity be so simultaneously in two respects: documentation and action.

A word about the former first of all. In the classical conception of history (the study of events in the past), each event or group of events in the past was worthy of study, and one chose with total freedom and preferably something which had not yet been studied by anybody else. It is evident that one will always be free to act like this. But it should also be stressed that if history aims to be a human science, it must, by way of priority, apply itself to the fields which supply it with general precepts on human behaviour, on the plans, models and types which can serve to show us the way in which those centuries, about which we know very little, unfolded. This means a choice, by priority, of those moments of evolution in which the documentation is exceptionally plentiful.

But this plenty itself constitutes a danger, because it ends up by overwhelming the historian and drowning the lines and threads of evolution in the mass of data. This is shown in practice by a recourse to the enumerative account which is strictly chronological and therefore, in fact, essentially static (in the sense that one shows successive states and not the dynamism

into decades, often more, and one need hardly remark that the evolution is not a linear one. Nothing is more irritating than seeing the existence of a long process of development contradicted because of a temporary change of direction in the curve. This, however, is how politicians and those engaged in politicology often reason.

which is the very essence of the problem: from a situation towards a pattern of behaviour).

The solution to this is to apply oneself, within those contexts which are favourably documented, to studying the complexes in which one cannot avoid the study of movement, that is, of crises—all sorts of crises, of course, because any sort of crisis constitutes a general human crisis in which all kinds of forces are involved and act in the direction of some collective human movement.

A study of crises, then.

Bearing on this, I shall quote from the theories of Benoit Verhaegen on "Immediate History".<sup>20</sup> Immediate history applies exclusively to the study of crises "not any old crisis, but those which represent a definite point of rupture between two methods of production, between two systems of social relationships, between two dominant ideologies. The crisis should be the moment of change which sheds light on all the elements of social formation, and all the levels of reality." This is quite clear for the choice of situations to study, but one should add that Verhaegen has applied these theories in an amazingly favourable situation as far as the sources are concerned: namely, the recent social movements in the Congo where he found it possible to interview a considerable number of people involved on all levels. It is easy to see how a technique such as this enables one to reconstruct the forces, the mechanisms and the successive patterns of behaviour, and, therefore, to construct valid models as working hypotheses in other situations.

And it seems to me that these models, handed down in this way, in different contexts, have a greater chance of turning into wholly proven recurrent sequences, which are, *a priori*, valid in other cases, and also valid in an understanding of the present, if not of the future. In short, they may well become laws.