

THE REVOLUTION IN THE
WORLD-VIEW OF HISTORY

About twenty years ago a book entitled *Umsturz im Weltbild der Physik* ("The Revolution in the World-View of Physics")¹ appeared and was eventually widely read. It described the basic change which our views in the natural sciences had undergone during the first three decades of this century.

A similar book could be written today concerning the other, humanistic side of our conception of the world, for so radical a change has taken place since then in humanistic ideas as well, that it approaches complete revolution. This change can be briefly described as a transition from the part-whole synthetic point of view to whole-part, analytic thinking; from a Ptolemaic, egocentric standpoint to a Copernican, relativistic one; and from "thinking in terms of nations" to "thinking in cultures."

Let us examine the last point first. A transition has taken place, it has been said, from thinking in national terms to thinking in terms of cultures or civilizations. What does this mean? One need not be a hardboiled skeptic to recognize with Goethe that what historiographers call "the Spirit of the Ages" is often merely their "own spirit, in which the Ages

1. By H. Zimmern.

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are reflected." We can no longer consider this to be an unconditional reproach, for we have also realized meanwhile that "every people has the right to choose its traditions," as a brilliant contemporary cultural philosopher, Baron J. de Evola, has formulated it. That is to say, the interpretation of the past in any given way is ultimately a matter of subjective discretion. However, "discretion" implies more arbitrariness than is actually involved, for, in fact, we are here confronted with a compulsion, a subjective constraint. All peoples see their past as they must see it, on the basis of its nature, its anxieties and longings, and its innermost impulses. History is the very way in which a person, a people, an epoch understands itself, interprets its own destiny.

It is not only men and nations that have their own historical forms of perception, but whole epochs as well. The Middle Ages of the West thought in terms of *imperia*, the Baroque period in dynasties, the nineteenth century in peoples and nations. Our own century is in a state of transition from "thinking in nations" to "thinking in cultures." The nineteenth century experienced its destiny in the form of destinies of peoples. Peoples and nations, that is, conscious human communities with the same language, culture, and history, were the decisive vehicles of political, economic, and cultural forces. Everything of significance that happened in our cultural sphere ran its course through the interplay of these units. Their survival, their growth, and their future appeared to constitute the meaning of history. Consequently, that century also saw peoples everywhere, and, indeed, peoples of the modern, liberal-democratic occidental cut. The ancient Egyptians were such a people, the Sumerians, the Indians, the Chinese; the Greeks, the Romans, the Carthaginians, the Gauls, the Germans, the Ottoman Turks, the Mongols; and again the present-day Egyptians, the Greeks, the Armenians, the Jews, the Syrians, the Indonesians, the Russians. Whenever these groups would not fit the scheme, they were simply considered "unredeemed" peoples, "not yet aware of themselves," "enslaved," not yet participating in the blessings of democracy. In all cases, however, they were possible subjects (and objects!) of "national" politics, which was forced upon certain groups among them with greater or less pressure, whether or not they themselves, as a majority, desired it and considered it necessary. They simply had to think in nationalistic categories, even if it called for the sacrifice of their essential nature to do so and even if the West itself incurred nothing but damage from it. For nationalism was not only the grand slogan of the century, it was at the same time its political and historical "a priori form of intuition."

In the meantime the wheel of history has rolled on a good way. Nationalism, which is now going through its greatest excesses in the Orient, is already beginning to collapse in the Occident. The politics of the Third Reich, that unique hybrid form of outmoded racial nationalism and potential Caesarian imperialism, represents, probably, the last orgy in which nationalism has indulged on its home grounds. What the West—more precisely, old Europe, for the New World has long since passed beyond that stage, and, indeed, in those countries which play a decisive part, has never thought nationalistically—is still going through at the moment in the way of nationalistic moods, resentments, oppositions, and jealousies, is only the backwash of a manner of thinking and perceiving which is rapidly fading away and which will scarcely outlive our century. Its place is obviously being taken by a mode of thinking of a completely different style and scope, in which the western nations are not stepping forward as the decisive units of history, but rather the West as a whole is coming onto the stage as the critical subject and object of history. Whenever and wherever “ultimate” questions of politics, economics, or culture are being argued today, they are automatically treated in terms transcendent of nations, that is, not in relation to this or that nation but to the occidental world. It is this Western World of Toynbee which holds sway over our consciousness as a true totality. In comparison to it the old nations are felt to be only dependent parts with neither sense nor destiny per se, autonomous neither in significance nor fate.

This totality of the western or occidental world, which is felt to be clearly demarcated as a whole from the rest of the world, even though a rationally drawn linear boundary is in many areas impossible, is conceived as a “cultural unity” or more precisely as a “civilization” (*eine: Hochkultur*). In the meaning used here of a community of people related in their historic destiny, people of autonomous thought, sharing the highest culture or civilization, this concept is still relatively new, at least as far as ordinary usage is concerned. It is, after all, only since Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* (1918 ff.) that it has been generally adopted. Once formulated, however, it was taken up eagerly in current thought and common language. It seemed as if everything had been waiting for this one word of redemption.² In it the western peoples found an expression for a feeling of community which was suddenly bursting through the old national encrustations, an expression for the sense of belonging to a great

2. People had, of course, talked of “cultures” in the sense of “civilizations” long before Spengler, but only with reference to non-western cultural communities and without the precise definition that Spengler gave the concept.

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community over and above, and in spite of, all linguistic, cultural, and traditional differences. With the weal or woe of this community every individual was felt to be inextricably bound. The awakening of this occidental community spirit can be observed especially well since World War I; and, above all, after World War II. Strictly speaking, one should of course call it a re-awakening, for a community feeling of this type did dominate the public mind once before—in the medieval period. In recent times, in the age of nationalism, it withdrew to the sublimer spheres of science and art but came clearly to the fore again toward the end of the nineteenth century, first in certain areas, such as economics and social movements. The spiritual, economic, and political shocks of World War I continued to break a trail for it. The idea of a League of Nations and the Pan-European plan of Count Coudenhove-Calergi bear eloquent witness to this fact in spite of their subsequent failure. Since World War II, which was certainly fought in part in the name of a Pan-European policy, a “New Order in Europe,” and above all, because of the war’s fateful results—the sudden appearance of Russia in the center of Europe and the shaking of the western position in the Near and Far East—the situation has been reversed. Nationalism has been put on the defensive everywhere, with no prospect of relief. On the other hand, the western sense of community has made everywhere a victorious advance. Science has here, as so often, served the function of a seismograph. By introducing “thinking in cultures” it has announced the distant tremors and, besides, furnished the concepts and slogans for the new way of thinking and feeling. For the form in which the West now conceives of its unity is that of a “civilization,” as a group of related nations with a uniform style and common fate, which makes and undergoes history as a totality.

Occidental man of the nineteenth century felt himself to be primarily a German, an Englishman, a Frenchman, and experienced his world as a world of peoples and nations. In the second half of the twentieth century he is a “Westerner” living world history as the history of civilizations. The West’s conception of itself as a civilization has a bearing not only on the present and the occidental cultural sphere; the whole past of the western world is seen at once in the light of this cultural concept, and western humanity suddenly sees everywhere in its surrounding world, too, growing, maturing, declining, disintegrating, decayed civilizations, where before were seen only peoples and nations—real or possible, liberated or oppressed, rising or falling. Its own past is experienced as the history—that is,

the life and development—of a massive organism reaching out over individuals, families, races, peoples, and nations, and having, as a whole, an individuality, a private life and a destiny. The West now relates every particular of its past to this totality, in order to interpret it in that light and, by interpreting, to understand. The same thing occurs with its environment, whether conceived in its present or historical aspect. We no longer ask primarily about peoples and nations, but rather about civilizations. Their history alone seems to us to be “world history” and worthy of special attention. What is enacted in intervals between them, and outside of them, carries a markedly lower value as “primitive history.” In a word then, we have passed from thinking in terms of the national state to thinking in “civilizations” and have thereby carried out a revolution in our conception of the world, by bringing to expression the West’s idea of itself as a civilization, an act which may well be necessary and conditioned by our fate.

This is, nevertheless, only one side, although the most striking one, of the “revolution in the world-view of history”; its foreground, so to speak. For the intellectual revolution which came inevitably with the transition from nationalistic to cultural thinking has brought in its wake a very serious extension of far-reaching consequence, above all for our historical world-view: the relativization of historical values.

For medieval man there were only “Christians” and “heathens,” “believers” and “infidels.” The first, who coincided with those belonging to his own cultural sphere, were full human beings, the latter, second-class humans, at best capable of conversion. Modern thinking about the world secularized this classification. Out of the Christians were made the “civilized,” out of the heathens the “barbarian,” the “savage,” “primitive,” or, at best, “exotic” peoples. The difference of rank remained: the “savage” or “native,” even if he belonged as an “exotic” to a people with a high degree of civilization, was haughtily tolerated as a “colored” man, a human of a lower order, an object of cynical exploitation and hypocritical attempts at “civilization,” wherever the Westerner could not or would not extirpate him. He was a pariah or outcast when fate forced him to live in the midst of a “white,” that is, an occidental environment. In brief, there was for the Westerner an objective scale of values in which he stood at the summit, with a wide gap separating him from all other peoples and races.

Western man conceived of world history in a corresponding fashion. Of all that had gone on in the past dating from the creation of Adam or the

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invention of the hand axe, that only was important enough for consideration which was or could be related to western man and his development. The world seemed to have been created merely in order to bring the Westerner into being. World history was seen as a linear evolutionary process (sometimes, it is true, with curves, entanglements, detours, and side branches leading nowhere), in which the present moment in the West represented the last phase and highest step of "progress."

The painful and tragic experiences of the twentieth century, both internal and external, have been accompanied as well by a revolution closely connected with the transition to thinking in cultural terms.

The discovery of the higher civilizations as "cultural continents," as units of history autonomous in fate and significance, has at the same time opened our eyes to their own proper values. It was recognised that not only the epochs of history stand "in an immediate relationship to God" as Ranke had shown in European history, but also, and even more so, the civilizations. We became modest. At the moment when a whole series of analogous structures were identified and compared to western civilization, it was no longer possible to avoid the insight that there could be no question of difference in rank or value, that there existed not merely one way of being cultured or civilized, but rather just as many ways as there were civilizations. The spiritual shocks of the age, which caused even those Westerners most optimistic about progress to grow doubtful of their divine semblance, as well as closer acquaintance with alien civilizations, also contributed to the discarding one by one of the old, arrogant prejudices and to their replacement by a new, judicious, objective verdict. Today the notion of any western superiority in rank or value is adhered to, if at all, only in the form of a cautious hypothesis with all sorts of reservations and qualifications.³ Even the technical preeminence of western civilization is no longer held in nearly the high esteem which it enjoyed at the beginning of the century. There is instead a tendency today to assume a certain constancy of the human substratum and to acknowledge the greatest achievements of the various civilizations as, in principle, equivalent in value. People no longer shut their eyes to the fact that there is a way to be civilized just as well "in Chinese" as "in Aztec" or "occidentally" and that there are no characteristics or criteria by means of which a class difference among civilizations could be objectively determined.

This has, in turn, had the consequence that the linear conception of

3. Cf., for example, the exceptionally cautious treatment of the question by A. J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London, Oxford University Press, 1933).

world history has fallen into disuse. The course of world history is no longer seen in the image “of a tapeworm that inexhaustibly adds on new epochs,” as Spengler ironically stated it, but in the image of a plurality of civilizations, in principle similar and equivalent in value, but variously placed in time and space and hence unequal in age. There exists no basis for raising one of them especially into prominence or devoting special attention to one. Actually, these complexes of history are all of equal importance for our new historical picture of the world. They resemble in this new conception a system of planets of approximately the same size and shape. One of them is western civilization. The only thing lacking is a sun in the center and a corresponding movement. It is not without justice that the intellectual reversal which has led from the egocentric, linear conception of history to the relativistic, rhythmic-periodic conception has been compared to the Copernican revolution in astronomy.⁴ The comparison is pertinent, but in many ways it expresses too little, for the revolution which underlies the transition from “Ptolemaic” to “Copernican” historical thought is probably even greater and of more consequence than the turn from the geocentric to the heliocentric view of the world as such.

What kind of movement in thought has led to this “revolution in the world-view of history”? It is worth while to subject this change to a closer scrutiny, since in it an illuminating piece of the history of western thought is revealed.

It is well known that academic thinking of the nineteenth and beginning twentieth centuries was dominated to a great extent by the natural sciences. The classical method of natural science is the inductive and synthetic method. The natural scientist gets his results by gathering empirically—by the method of experimental observation—the greatest possible number of particular bits of knowledge, which he then puts together into larger complexes, or from which he derives by analogical reasoning or inductions laws of apparently universal validity. Thus he constructs his picture of the world in the fashion of a mosaic, by advancing from part to part and from the parts to their connections, gaining in this way ever higher points of view, more comprehensive insights, and more general laws. In the realm of physical science, the study of so-called lifeless or inorganic nature, this approach was able to produce exceptionally successful results, because the phenomena in this area, at least within the order

4. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York, Knopf, 1932, p. 25). Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Social Philosophies of an Age of Crisis* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1951), p. 265, and cf. pp. 279 ff., 287 f.; a similar statement appears in A. J. Toynbee, *op. cit.*, Vol. I.

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of magnitude generally accessible to man (the macroscopic realm), are of great uniformity, in a rather loose state of interdependence, and ruled by relatively few and simple laws (e.g., causality) or can, at least, be operated with on this assumption. The situation became questionable, on the other hand, when the same approach was tried out in the realm of organic nature, where, even in the macroscopic sphere, essentially more complicated phenomena and more intricate regularities enter the picture. Nevertheless, the attempt was begun on a wide front and with the greatest optimism. The methodological doubts that should have blocked such a transfer of technique were studiously avoided, and the task was started of pursuing not only the biological disciplines in the narrower sense, but also the sciences of man up into psychology and sociology in a “scientific,” that is, inductive, synthetic manner.

Confidence was boundless, for it was supported by the triumphant successes of the exact sciences and technology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In spite of this, one thing should even then have had a cautioning, sobering effect: the theoretical inexhaustibility of the universe. Reality cannot, in principle, be conquered by an atomistic and synthetic method, for no parts are imaginable which could not be further divided. Atomism is of necessity doomed to founder on this infinite regression. In the realm of inorganic nature this theoretical difficulty is not too tragic because of the above-mentioned uniformity of natural phenomena and the simplicity of the laws regulating them. A validated law of, say, the causal type “whenever A appears, B follows,” retains its practical value even if it is recognized to be a merely statistical law of averages at the microscopic level. But in organic nature, where even the phenomena in the macroscopic sphere are much more strongly individuated and at the same time interdependent, such statistical approximations are of little use. From this fact follows here—within the framework of the atomistic synthetic approach—the necessity of limiting one’s self to individual instances and foregoing the establishment of “exact” laws altogether. That was, in fact, the conclusion which the so-called humanistic sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) reached, placing history at the top.⁵ However, having accepted this limitation, the humanistic sciences did not relinquish the methods of the natural sciences; still less did they set up their own method, as has often been maintained. Indeed, the characteristic method of the natural sciences, the atomistic-synthetic principle described

5. The separation of the “nomothetic” and the “idiographic” sciences made by Windelband and Rickert is based on this limitation.

above, was retained and even constituted the essential part of humanistic methodology, above all, of “classical” historiography. That this method was, of necessity, blind to the profounder insights into its subject matter is only too understandable in the light of its theoretical inadequacy, with which we shall deal in a moment. Worse yet, it led to that fatal overspecialization which has long since been recognized as the canker of our scientific life. A methodological disposition that was on principle out to get at the ultimate elements as constituents of reality, in order to allow an image of this reality to rise out of them, was bound to lead deeper and deeper into the infinity of the inexhaustible world. However, the deeper it led, the farther the shores withdrew and the deeper sank the plummet. The various “daring seafarers” of science drew farther and farther apart; specialization and its consequent fragmentation into a thousand fields of study developed more and more. In the face of a swelling flood of scientifically disclosed and elaborated particulars, the individual scholar was soon, for practical reasons alone⁶ no longer in a position to see past his own most narrowly defined special field. The baroque ideal of the *uomo universale*, which Goethe was one of the last to fulfil, became in these circumstances just as much of a chimera as the *universitas litterarum*, which no mind, however comprehensive, can realize today. However, theory itself naturally became specialized along with practical research—if no one possessed a comprehensive image of the world, none could be furnished for others—and together with theory, general intellectuality. It disintegrated, dissolved, curdled like stale milk that is put on a stove. It lost its inner coherence, its organic unity, and was transformed into an agglomerated complexity of particular data, not unlike the star-filled sky as it appears to the naked eye. By its atomization in this fashion, the occidental picture of the world resembled more and more its methodological ideal. And like this ideal it turned out to be extremely efficient and productive in the realm of physical scientific specialization and the sphere of inorganic nature; on the other hand, it failed wherever it was called upon to grasp totalities and to do justice to the peculiarities of organic nature.

Psychology was the first science to gain an insight into this failure and, indeed, precisely in connection with the problem of wholes. It was

6. The biologist J. von Uexküll has calculated that he would have to live three average life-spans in order to master the special literature of the last sixty years in his field. The literature of such a narrowly limited field as psychological Gestalt theory, of which we shall speak below, comprehended, according to the statement of R. Matthaes in *Das Gestaltproblem* (Munich, 1929), even a quarter-century ago over six hundred items, and this is a case of a special discipline, with only a few works reaching back past 1900, that is, at the time the book was published.

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recognized that the psyche was something greater than and different from the sum of those things which the nineteenth century took to be its contents, i.e., the atomistically conceived perceptual, emotional, and volitional elements. It was realized that the individual psychological event was interwoven in a much more intimate way with the whole condition of the psyche at any given moment than was represented by a merely spatio-temporal proximity, and that this totality, for its part, at least determined the resonance of the parts, and that, therefore, the grasping of the whole had to precede the grasping of the parts, and not vice versa. Social and cultural psychology seemed to urge the same conclusion. Here it was the problem of meaning that gave the impetus to a revision of methods. Significance, it was realized, is dependent on structure, is given together with structuralization. To understand significance is to grasp a structure. But a structure is also grasped only "from above," from a structural unity, not primarily from its parts, that is to say, analytically and not synthetically. How the basically analytically oriented, so-called "humanistic psychology of understanding," which was most concerned with totalities and structures, emerged as victor from this "crisis of psychology,"⁷ is well known. In this clash it was furnished most valuable assistance by a branch of psychology little known and little noticed by the public, Gestalt psychology, especially in the explicit form of Gestalt theory. Here it was proved conclusively by experiment: first, that there are at a phenomenological level totalities (*Gestalten*), that is, forms of a complex nature with definite and specific properties such as nonadditiveness, structuralization, nonpermutability of parts, transposability; second, that these totalities or *Gestalten*, just because of their special properties, can in principle be grasped only by an analytic, not a synthetic, process; third, that it was not only desirable but also possible to grasp them directly and immediately as total structures; finally, that these forms are of decisive importance not only in the field of sense-perception but also in the whole psychic life.⁸

It was natural that these insights had an effect on the other "biological" sciences too; for wholeness in the definition of psychological Gestalt theory is a phenomenon that is met with throughout the organic realm and is, in fact, constitutive for all living phenomena. Wherever a living being ap-

7. S. Karl Bühler, *Die Krise der Psychologie* (Jena, 1927).

8. The chief representatives of psychological Gestalt theory are Christian von Ehrenfels (1859-1932), Alexius Meinong (1853-1920), Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, Georg Elias Müller, Kurt Koffka, Bruno Petermann, Felix Krueger, and Ferdinand Weinhandl. The latest survey of the field can be found in David Katz, *Gestaltpsychologie* (Basel, 1944); see also Matthaei, *op. cit.*

pears and life-processes take place, one comes up against total forms and structures, non-additive organizations and dynamic self-articulating processes, where it is always a question of first grasping the given whole in its specific quality as a whole before advancing, by means of structural analysis, to the parts or, ultimately, to the elements out of which it is built. This involves always the “understanding” of significant forms, which, again, can be done only in the light of the totality that produces significance. This is true for biology in the narrower sense, for botany, zoölogy, and anatomy, for physiology, morphology, psychology, for anthropology, sociology, ethnology, historiography, the science of culture, and, in general, all sciences concerned with any form or expression of life. In all these disciplines the new “holistic” approach has been accepted more or less completely. One can say that today the younger, more progressive and modern members of the academic and scientific world, those who possess an organ of perception for the peculiar character of “living” as against “dead” nature and who, besides, sense the need to overcome the tragic isolation of overspecialization, already have the upper hand. The older statistical-synthetic approach in the disciplines enumerated above is everywhere fighting a delaying action. This is true, of course, also of historical science, to which this article is chiefly devoted. Here the methodological revolution, the *renversement des méthodes*—the awakening of the holistic approach—is closely connected above all with the concept of cultural morphology and thereby with the names of Nikolai Jakovlevich Danilevskii (1822–85), Leo Frobenius (1873–1937), Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), Felix Koneczny (1862–1949), Arnold Joseph Toynbee (b. 1889), Pitirim Alexandrovich Sorokin (b. 1891) and others. In cultural morphology and the related currents of modern historiography and sociology that revolution in the world-view of history from which we began has first of all taken place. It has in this respect played a leading role and will probably continue to head the development for some time. The new holistic, analytical mode of thinking has spread from cultural morphology to the other humanistic sciences. It has given the theoretical expression to that “thinking in cultures” which was already in a position of practical dominance over the thought and feeling of modern man. It has furnished precise concepts for this way of thought and thereby brought it our awareness. It has for the first time replaced the Ptolemaic, egocentric point of view by the Copernican, relativistic approach, and in doing all this it has, finally, pointed the way to a possible victory over the fatal fragmentation of the occidental intellect, its disintegration and atomization. This way is—let

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this be our final remark—not as new as it appears. It involves actually a turning back from a cul-de-sac and the recollection of a mode of thought which experienced the world as a sound and whole entity—the approach of a Leibniz, a Vico, a Goethe. Inasmuch, however, as this act of recollection is expressed by a transition from thinking in terms of national states or “parochial units” (Toynbee) to “thinking in cultures,” it is revealed as a measure born of crisis in our civilization’s fight for survival. Forced to gather all its strength in a time of extreme internal and external affliction, to overcome the carefree *laissez faire, laissez aller* of earlier times and to win back its striking power as a world-historical force, this civilization realizes in its new “panoramic” view, above all, its own unity. That it is at the same time returning to an organic view of the world and universe allows us to hope that this change will prove to be in other respects, as well, a fortunate one.