

tially different. In my first lecture I quoted a remark of Professor Barracough that history was "not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgments." While I was preparing these lectures, a physicist from this university, in a B.B.C. broadcast, defined a scientific truth as "a statement which has been publicly accepted by the experts."⁹ Neither of these formulas is entirely satisfactory—for reasons which will appear when I come to discuss the question of objectivity. But it was striking to find a historian and a physicist independently formulating the same problem in almost exactly the same words.

Analogies are, however, a notorious trap for the unwary: and I want to consider respectfully the arguments for believing that, great as are the differences between the mathematical and the natural sciences, or between different sciences within these categories, a fundamental distinction can be drawn between these sciences and history, and that this distinction makes it misleading to call history—and perhaps also the other so-called social sciences—by the name of science. These objections—some of them more convincing than others—are in brief: (1) that history deals exclusively with the unique, science with the general; (2) that history teaches no lessons; (3) that history is unable to predict; (4) that history is necessarily subjective, since man is observing himself; and (5) that history, unlike science, involves issues of religion and

⁹ J. Ziman in *The Listener* (August 18, 1960).

morality. I will try to examine each of these points in turn.

First, it is alleged that history deals with the unique and particular, and science with the general and universal. This view may be said to start with Aristotle, who declared that poetry was "more philosophical" and "more serious" than history, since poetry was concerned with general truth and history with particular.¹ A host of later writers, down to Collingwood,² inclusive, made a similar distinction between science and history. This seems to rest on a misunderstanding. Hobbes' famous dictum still stands: "Nothing in the world is universal but names, for the things named are every one of them individual and singular."³ This is certainly true of the physical sciences: no two geological formations, no two animals of the same species, and no two atoms, are identical. Similarly, no two historical events are identical. But insistence on the uniqueness of historical events has the same paralyzing effect as the platitude taken over by Moore from Bishop Butler and at one time especially beloved by linguistic philosophers: "Everything is what it is and not another thing." Embarked on this course, you soon attain a sort of philosophical *nirvana*, in which nothing that matters can be said about anything.

¹ *Poetics*, Ch. ix.

² Collingwood: *Historical Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 5.

³ *Leviathan*, I, iv.

The very use of language commits the historian, like the scientist, to generalization. The Peloponnesian War and the Second World War were very different, and both were unique. But the historian calls them both wars, and only the pedant will protest. When Gibbon wrote of both the establishment of Christianity by Constantine and the rise of Islam as revolutions,⁴ he was generalizing two unique events. Modern historians do the same when they write of the English, French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions. The historian is not really interested in the unique, but in what is general in the unique. In the 1920's discussions by historians of the causes of the war of 1914 usually proceeded on the assumption that it was due either to the mismanagement of diplomats, working in secret and uncontrolled by public opinion, or to the unfortunate division of the world into territorial sovereign states. In the 1930's discussions proceeded on the assumption that it was due to rivalries between the imperialist powers driven by the stresses of capitalism in decline to partition the world between them. These discussions all involved generalizations about the causes of war, or at any rate of war in twentieth-century conditions. The historian constantly uses generalization to test his evidence. If the evidence is not clear whether Richard murdered the princes in the Tower, the historian will ask himself—perhaps unconsciously rather than con-

⁴ *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Ch. xx, 1.

sciously—whether it was a habit of rulers of the period to liquidate potential rivals to their throne; and his judgment will, quite rightly, be influenced by this generalization.

The reader, as well as the writer, of history, is a chronic generalizer, applying the observation of the historian to other historical contexts with which he is familiar—or perhaps to his own time. When I read Carlyle's *French Revolution*, I find myself again and again generalizing his comments by applying them to my own special interest in the Russian revolution. Take for instance this on the terror:

Horrible, in lands that had known equal justice—not so unnatural in lands that had never known it.

Or, more significantly, this:

It is unfortunate, though very natural, that the history of this period has so generally been written in hysterics. Exaggeration abounds, execration, wailing; and on the whole, darkness.⁵

Or another, this time from Burckhardt on the growth of the modern state in the sixteenth century:

The more recently power has originated, the less it can remain stationary—first because those who created it have become accustomed to rapid further movement and because they are and will remain innovators *per se*; secondly, because the forces aroused or subdued by them can be employed only through further acts of violence.⁶

⁵ *History of the French Revolution*, I, v, Ch. 9; III, i, Ch. 1.

⁶ Burckhardt: *Judgments on History and Historians*, p. 34.

It is nonsense to say that generalization is foreign to history; history thrives on generalizations. As Mr. E. H. Carr neatly puts it in a volume of *The New Cambridge Modern History*, "what distinguishes the historian from the collector of historical facts is generalization";⁷ he might have added that the same thing distinguishes the natural scientist from the naturalist collector of specimens. But do not suppose that generalization permits us to construct some vast scheme of history into which specific events must be fitted. And, since Marx is one of those who is often accused of constructing, or believing in, such a scheme, I will quote by way of summing-up a passage from one of his letters which puts the matter in its right perspective:

Events strikingly similar, but occurring in a different historical milieu, lead to completely dissimilar results. By studying each of these evolutions separately and then comparing them, it is easy to find the key to the understanding of this phenomenon; but it is never possible to arrive at this understanding by using the *passé-partout* of some historical-philosophical theory whose great virtue is to stand above history.⁸

⁷ *The Cambridge Modern History*, II (1958), p. 20.

⁸ Marx and Engels: *Works* (Russian ed.), xv, p. 378. The letter from which this passage is quoted appeared in the Russian journal *Otechestvennyye Zapiski* in 1877. Professor Popper appears to associate Marx with what he calls "the central mistake of historians: the belief that historical tendencies or trends 'can be immediately derived from universal laws alone'" (*The Poverty of Historicism* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957], pp. 128-9): this is precisely what Marx denied.

History is concerned with the relation between the unique and the general. As a historian, you can no more separate them, or give precedence to one over the other, than you can separate fact and interpretation.

This is perhaps the place for a brief remark on the relations between history and sociology. Sociology at present faces two opposite dangers—the danger of becoming ultra-theoretical and the danger of becoming ultra-empirical. The first is the danger of losing itself in abstract and meaningless generalizations about society in general. Society with a big S is as misleading a fallacy as History with a big H. This danger is brought nearer by those who assign to sociology the exclusive task of generalizing from the unique events recorded by history: it has even been suggested that sociology is distinguished from history by having "laws."⁹ The other danger is that foreseen by Karl Mannheim almost a generation ago, and very much present today, of a sociology "split into a series of dis-

⁹ This appears to be the view of Professor Popper (*The Open Society*, 2nd ed. [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952], ii, p. 122). Unfortunately he gives an example of a sociological law: "Wherever the freedom of thought, and of the communication of thought, is effectively protected by legal institutions and institutions ensuring the publicity of discussion, there will be scientific progress." This was written in 1942 or 1943, and was evidently inspired by the belief that the Western democracies, in virtue of their institutional arrangements, would remain in the van of scientific progress—a belief since dispelled, or severely qualified, by developments in the Soviet Union. Far from being a law, it was at best a valid generalization.

crete technical problems of social readjustment."¹ Sociology is concerned with historical societies every one of which is unique and moulded by specific historical antecedents and conditions. But the attempt to avoid generalization and interpretation by confining oneself to so-called "technical" problems of enumeration and analysis is merely to become the unconscious apologist of a static society. Sociology, if it is to become a fruitful field of study, must, like history, concern itself with the relation between the unique and the general. But it must also become dynamic—a study not of society at rest (for no such society exists), but of social change and development. For the rest, I would only say that the more sociological history becomes, and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both. Let the frontier between them be kept wide open for two-way traffic.

The question of generalization is closely connected with my second question: the lessons of history. The real point about generalization is that through it we attempt to learn from history, to apply the lessons drawn from one set of events to another set of events when we generalize, we are consciously or unconsciously trying to do this. Those who reject generalization and insist that history is concerned exclusively with the unique are, logically enough, those who deny

¹ Karl Mannheim: *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; 1936), p. 228.

that anything can be learned from history. But the assertion that men learn nothing from history is contradicted by a multitude of observable facts. No experience is more common. In 1919 I was present at the Paris peace conference as a junior member of the British delegation. Everyone in the delegation believed that we could learn from the lessons of the Vienna Congress, the last great European peace conference a hundred years earlier. A certain Captain Webster, then employed in the War Office, now Sir Charles Webster and an eminent historian, wrote an essay telling us what those lessons were. Two of them have remained in my memory. One was that it was dangerous, when re-drawing the map of Europe, to neglect the principle of self-determination. The other was that it was dangerous to throw secret documents into your waste-paper basket, the contents of which would certainly be bought by the secret service of some other delegation. These lessons of history were taken for gospel and influenced our behaviour. This example is recent and trivial. But it would be easy to trace in comparatively remote history the influence of the lessons of a still remoter past. Everyone knows about the impact of ancient Greece upon Rome. But I am not sure whether any historian has attempted to make a precise analysis of the lessons which the Romans learned, or believed themselves to have learned, from the history of Hellas. An examination of the lessons drawn in Western Europe in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries from Old

Testament history might yield rewarding results. The English Puritan revolution cannot be fully understood without it; and the conception of the chosen people was an important factor in the rise of modern nationalism. The stamp of a classical education was heavily imprinted in the nineteenth century on the new ruling class in Great Britain. Grote, as I have already noted, pointed to Athens as an exemplar for the new democracy; and I should like to see a study of the extensive and important lessons consciously or unconsciously imparted to British empire-builders by the history of the Roman Empire. In my own particular field, the makers of the Russian revolution were profoundly impressed—one might almost say, obsessed—by the lessons of the French revolution, of the revolutions of 1848, and of the Paris commune of 1871. But I shall recall here the qualification imposed by the dual character of history. Learning from history is never simply a one-way process. To learn about the present in the light of the past means also to learn about the past in the light of the present. The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them.

My third point is the role of prediction in history: no lessons, it is said, can be learned from history because history, unlike science, cannot predict the future. This question is involved in a tissue of misunderstandings. As we have seen, scientists are no longer

so eager as they used to be to talk about the laws of nature. The so-called laws of science which affect our ordinary life are in fact statements of tendency, statements of what will happen, other things being equal, or in laboratory conditions. They do not claim to predict what will happen in concrete cases. The law of gravity does not prove that that particular apple will fall to the ground: somebody may catch it in a basket. The law of optics that light travels in a straight line does not prove that a particular ray of light may not be refracted or scattered by some intervening object. But this does not mean that these laws are worthless, or not in principle valid. Modern physical theories, we are told, deal only with the probabilities of events taking place. Today science is more inclined to remember that induction can logically lead only to probabilities or to reasonable belief, and is more anxious to treat its pronouncements as general rules or guides, the validity of which can be tested only in specific action. "Science, *d'où prévoyance; prévoyance, d'où action*," as Comte put it.² The clue to the question of prediction in history lies in this distinction between the general and the specific, between the universal and the unique. The historian, as we have seen, is bound to generalize; and, in so doing, he provides general guides for future action which, though not specific predictions, are both valid and useful. But he cannot predict specific events, because the specific is

²*Cours de philosophie positive*, i, p. 51.

unique and because the element of accident enters into it. This distinction, which worries philosophers, is perfectly clear to the ordinary man. If two or three children in a school develop measles, you will conclude that the epidemic will spread; and this prediction, if you care to call it such, is based on a generalization from past experience, and is a valid and useful guide to action. But you cannot make the specific prediction that Charles or Mary will catch measles. The historian proceeds in the same way. People do not expect the historian to predict that revolution will break out in Ruritania next month. The kind of conclusion which they will seek to draw, partly from specific knowledge of Ruritanian affairs and partly from a study of history, is that conditions in Ruritania are such that a revolution is likely to occur in the near future if somebody touches it off, or unless somebody on the government side does something to stop it; and this conclusion might be accompanied by estimates based partly on the analogy of other revolutions, of the attitude which different sectors of the population may be expected to adopt. The prediction, if such it can be called, can be realized only through the occurrence of unique events, which cannot themselves be predicted. But this does not mean that inferences drawn from history about the future are worthless, or that they do not possess a conditional validity which serves both as a guide to action and a key to our understanding of how things happen. I do not wish to suggest that the inferences of the social scientist or of the

historian can match those of the physical scientist in precision, or that their inferiority in this respect is due merely to the greater backwardness of the social sciences. The human being is on any view the most complex rational entity known to us, and the study of his behaviour may well involve difficulties different in kind from those confronting the physical scientist. All I wish to establish is that their aims and methods are not fundamentally dissimilar.

My fourth point introduces a far more cogent argument for drawing a line of demarcation between the social sciences, including history, and the physical sciences. This is the argument that in the social sciences subject and object belong to the same category and interact reciprocally on each other. Human beings are not only the most complex and variable of natural entities, but they have to be studied by other human beings, not by independent observers of another species. Here man is no longer content, as in the biological sciences, to study his own physical make-up and physical reactions. The sociologist, the economist, or the historian needs to penetrate into forms of human behaviour in which the will is active, to ascertain why the human beings who are the object of his study will to act as they did. This sets up a relation, which is peculiar to history and the social sciences, between the observer and what is observed. The point of view of the historian enters irrevocably into every observa-

tion which he makes; history is shot through and through with relativity. In Karl Mannheim's words "even the categories in which experiences are subsumed, collected, and ordered vary according to the social position of the observer."³ But it is not merely true that the bias of the social scientist necessarily enters into all his observations. It is also true that the process of observation affects and modifies what is being observed. And this can happen in two opposite ways. The human beings whose behaviour is made the object of analysis and prediction may be warned in advance by the prediction of consequences unwelcome to them, and be induced by it to modify their action, so that the prediction, however correctly based on the analysis, proves self-frustrating. One reason why history rarely repeats itself among historically conscious people is that the *dramatis personae* are aware at the second performance of the *dénouement* of the first, and their action is affected by that knowledge.⁴ The Bolsheviks knew that the French revolution had ended in a Napoleon, and feared that their own revolution might end in the same way. They therefore mistrusted Trotsky, who among their leaders looked most like a Napoleon, and trusted Stalin, who looked least like a Napoleon. But this process may work in a converse direction. The economist who, by a scientific analysis

³ Mannheim: *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 130.

⁴ This argument has been developed by the author in *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1950), I, p. 42.

of existing economic conditions, predicts an approaching boom or slump may, if his authority is great and his arguments cogent, contribute by the very fact of his prediction to the occurrence of the phenomenon predicted. The political scientist who, on the strength of historical observations, nourishes the conviction that despotism is short-lived, may contribute to the downfall of the despot. Everyone is familiar with the behaviour of candidates at elections who predict their own victory for the conscious purpose of rendering the fulfilment of the prediction more likely; and one suspects that economists, political scientists, and historians, when they venture on prediction, are sometimes inspired by the unconscious hope of hastening the realization of the prediction. All that one can perhaps safely say about these complex relations is that interaction between the observer and what is observed, between the social scientist and his data, between the historian and his facts, is continuous, and continuously varies; and that this appears to be a distinctive feature of history and of the social sciences.

I should perhaps note here that some physicists in recent years have spoken of their science in terms which appear to suggest more striking analogies between the physical universe and the world of the historian. In the first place, their results are said to involve a principle of uncertainty or indeterminacy. I shall speak in my next lecture of the nature and limits of so-called determinism in history. But whether the indeterminacy of modern physics resides in the nature

of the universe or is merely an index of our own hitherto imperfect understanding of it (this point is still in debate), I should have the same doubts about finding in it significant analogies with our ability to make historical predictions as one had a few years ago about the attempts of some enthusiasts to find proof in it of the operation of free will in the universe. Secondly, we are told that in modern physics distances in space and lapses of time have measures depending on the motion of the "observer." In modern physics all measurements are subject to inherent variations due to the impossibility of establishing a constant relation between the "observer" and the object under observation; both the "observer" and the thing observed—both subject and object—enter into the final result of the observation. But, while these descriptions would apply with a minimum of change to the relations between the historian and the objects of his observations, I am not satisfied that the essence of these relations is in any real sense comparable with the nature of relations between the physicist and his universe; and though I am in principle concerned to reduce rather than to inflate the differences which separate the approach of the historian from that of the scientist, it will not help to attempt to spirit these differences away by relying on imperfect analogies.

But while it is, I think, fair to say that the involvement of the social scientist or historian in the object of his study is of a different kind than that of the physical scientist, and the issues raised by the relation

between subject and object infinitely more complicated, this is not the end of the matter. Classical theories of knowledge, which prevailed throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, all assumed a sharp dichotomy between the knowing subject and the object known. However the process was conceived, the model constructed by the philosophers showed subject and object, man and the external world, divided and apart. This was the great age of the birth and development of science; and theories of knowledge were strongly influenced by the outlook of the pioneers of science. Man was set sharply against the external world. He grappled with it as with something intractable and potentially hostile—intractable because it was difficult to understand, potentially hostile because it was difficult to master. With the successes of modern science this outlook has been radically modified. The scientist nowadays is far less likely to think of the forces of nature as something to fight against than as something to co-operate with and to harness to his purposes. Classical theories of knowledge no longer fit the newer science, and least of all the science of physics. It is not surprising that during the past fifty years philosophers have begun to call them in question, and to recognize that the process of knowledge, far from setting subject and object sharply apart, involves a measure of interrelation and interdependence between them. This is, however, extremely significant for the social sciences. In my first lecture, I suggested that the study of history was difficult to

reconcile with the traditional empiricist theory of knowledge. I should now like to argue that the social sciences as a whole, since they involve man as both subject and object, both investigator and thing investigated, are incompatible with any theory of knowledge which pronounces a rigid divorce between subject and object. Sociology, in its attempts to establish itself as a coherent body of doctrine, has quite rightly set up a branch called the sociology of knowledge. This has, however, not yet got very far—mainly, I suspect, because it has been content to go round and round inside the cage of traditional theory of knowledge. If philosophers, under the impact first of modern physical science, and now of modern social science, are beginning to break out from this cage, and construct some more up-to-date model for the processes of knowledge than the old billiard-ball model of the impact of data on a passive consciousness, this is a good omen for the social sciences and for history in particular. This is a point of some importance to which I shall return later when I come to consider what we mean by objectivity in history.

Last but not least, I have to discuss the view that history, being intimately involved in questions of religion and morality, is thereby distinguished from science in general, and perhaps even from the other social sciences. Of the relation of history to religion I shall say only the little that is necessary to make my

own position clear. To be a serious astronomer is compatible with belief in a God who created and ordered the universe. But it is not compatible with belief in a God who intervenes at will to change the course of a planet, to postpone an eclipse, or to alter the rules of the cosmic game. In the same way, it is sometimes suggested, a serious historian may believe in a God who has ordered, and given meaning to, the course of history as a whole, though he cannot believe in the Old Testament kind of God who intervenes to slaughter the Amalekites, or cheats on the calendar by extending the hours of daylight for the benefit of Joshua's army. Nor can he invoke God as an explanation of particular historical events. Father D'Arcy in a recent book attempted to make this distinction:

It would not do for a student to answer every question in history by saying that it was the finger of God. Not until we have gone as far as most in tidying up mundane events and the human drama are we permitted to bring in wider considerations.*

The awkwardness of this view is that it appears to treat religion like the joker in the pack of cards, to be reserved for really important tricks that cannot be taken in any other way. Karl Barth, the Lutheran theologian, did better when he pronounced a total

*M. C. D'Arcy: *The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), p. 164. He had been anticipated by Polybius: "Wherever it is possible to find out the cause of what is happening one should not have recourse to the gods" (quoted in Kurt von Fritz: *The Theory of the Mixed Constitution in Antiquity* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1954], p. 390).