most elementary characteristics—the instilling of wonder at that which is as it is. This very real development is reflected and foreshadowed in Marx's political thought. Turning the tradition upside down within its own framework, he did not actually get rid of Plato's ideas, though he did record the darkening of the clear sky where those ideas, as well as many other presences, had once become visible to the eyes of men.

THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY

Ancient and Modern

I: HISTORY AND NATURE

Let us begin with Herodotus, whom Cicero called pater historiae and who has remained father of Western history.¹ He tells us in the first sentence of the Persian Wars that the purpose of his enterprise is to preserve that which owes its existence to men, τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων; lest it be obliterated by time, and to bestow upon the glorious, wondrous deeds of Greeks and barbarians sufficient praise to assure their remembrance by posterity and thus make their glory shine through the centuries.

This tells us a great deal and yet does not tell us enough. For us, concern with immortality is not a matter of course, and Herodotus, since this was a matter of course to him, does not tell us much about it. His understanding of the task of history—to save human deeds from the futility that comes from oblivion—was rooted in the Greek concept and experience of nature, which comprehended all things that come into being by themselves without assistance from men or gods—the Olympian gods did not claim to have created the world²—and therefore are immortal. Since the things of nature are ever-present, they are not likely to be overlooked or forgotten; and since they are forever, they do not need human remembrance for their further existence. All living creatures, man not excepted, are contained in this realm of being-forever, and Aristotle explicitly assures us that man, insofar as he is a natural being and belongs to the species of mankind, possesses immortality; through the recurrent cycle of life, nature assures the same kind of being-forever to things that are born and die as to things that are and do not
change, "Being for living creatures is Life," and being-forever (ἀεί et θνή) corresponds to ἀνεπεκτός, procreation. 

No doubt this eternal recurrence is the closest possible approximation of a world of becoming to that of being, but it does not, of course, make individual men immortal; on the contrary, embedded in a cosmos in which everything was immortal, it was mortality which became the hallmark of human existence. Men are "the mortals," the only mortal things there are, for animals exist only as members of their species and not as individuals. The mortality of man lies in the fact that individual life, a βίος with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life, ζωή. This individual life is distinguished from all other things by the rectilinear course of its movement, which, so to speak, cuts through the circular movements of biological life. This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order. When men pursue their purposes, tilling the effortless earth, forcing the free-flowing wind into their sails, crossing the ever-rolling waves, they cut across a movement which is purposeless and turning within itself. When Sophocles (in the famous chorus of Antigone) says that there is nothing more awe-inspiring than man, he goes on to exemplify this by evoking purposeful human activities which do violence to nature because they disturb what, in the absence of mortals, would be the eternal quiet of being-forever that rests or swings within itself.

What is difficult for us to realize is that the great deeds and works of which mortals are capable, and which become the topic of historical narrative, are not seen as parts of either an encompassing whole or a process; on the contrary, the stress is always on single instances and single gestures. These single instances, deeds or events, interrupt the circular movement of daily life in the same sense that the rectilinear βίος of the mortals interrupts the circular movement of biological life. The subject matter of history is these interruptions—the extraordinary, in other words.

When in late antiquity speculations began about the nature of indeed what Vico thought divine action did in the realm of nature and human action in the realm of history.

In the modern age history emerged as something it never had been before. It was no longer composed of the deeds and sufferings of men, and it no longer told the story of events affecting the lives of men; it became a man-made process, the only all-comprehending process which owed its existence exclusively to the human race. Today this quality which distinguished history from nature is also a thing of the past. We know today that though we cannot "make" nature in the sense of creation, we are quite capable of starting new natural processes, and that in a sense therefore we "make nature," to the extent that is, that we "make history." It is true we have reached this stage only with the nuclear discoveries, where natural forces are let loose, unchained, so to speak, and where the natural processes which take place would never have existed without direct interference of human action. This stage goes far beyond not only the pre-modern age, when wind and water were used to substitute for and multiply human forces, but also the industrial age, with its steam engine and internal-combustion motor, where natural forces were imitated and utilized as man-made means of production.

The contemporary decline of interest in the humanities, and especially in the study of history, which seems inevitable in all completely modernized countries, is quite in accord with the first impulses that led to modern historical science. What is definitely out of place today is the resignation which led Vico into the study of history. We can do in the natural-physical realm what he thought we could do only in the realm of history. We have begun to act into nature as we used to act into history. If it is merely a question of processes, it has turned out that man is as capable of starting natural processes which would not have come about without human interference as he is of starting something new in the field of human affairs.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, technology has emerged as the meeting ground of the natural and historical sciences, and although hardly a single great scientific discovery has ever been made for pragmatic, technical, or practical purposes
latest developments in the natural sciences. They have brought us back to the common origin of both nature and history in the modern age and demonstrate that their common denominator lies indeed in the concept of process—not less than the common denominator of nature and history in antiquity lay in the concept of immortality. But the experience which underlies the modern age’s notion of process, unlike the experience underlying the ancient notion of immortality, is by no means primarily an experience which man made in the world surrounding him; on the contrary, it sprang from the despair of ever experiencing and knowing adequately all that is given to man and not made by him. Against this despair modern man summoned up the full measure of his own capacities; despairing of ever finding truth through mere contemplation, he began to try out his capacities for action, and by doing so he could not help becoming aware that wherever man acts he starts processes. The notion of process does not denote an objective quality of either history or nature; it is the inevitable result of human action. The first result of men’s acting into history is that history becomes a process, and the most cogent argument for men’s acting into nature in the guise of scientific inquiry is that today, in Whitehead’s formulation, “nature is a process.”

To act into nature, to carry human unpredictability into a realm where we are confronted with elemental forces which we shall perhaps never be able to control reliably, is dangerous enough. Even more dangerous would it be to ignore that for the first time in our history the human capacity for action has begun to dominate all others—the capacity for wonder and thought in contemplation no less than the capacities of homo faber and the human animal laborans. This, of course, does not mean that men from now on will no longer be able to fabricate things or to think or to labor. Not the capabilities of man, but the constellation which orders their mutual relationships can and does change historically. Such changes can best be observed in the changing self-interpretations of man throughout history, which, though they may be quite irrelevant for the ultimate “what” of human nature, are still the briefest and most succinct witnesses to the spirit of whole epochs. Thus, schematically speaking,

Greek classic antiquity agreed that the highest form of human life was spent in a polis and that the supreme human capacity was speech—ζων πολιτικόν and ζων λόγον ἐχον, in Aristotle’s famous twofold definition; Rome and medieval philosophy defined man as the animal rationale; in the initial stages of the modern age, man was thought of primarily as homo faber, until, in the nineteenth century, man was interpreted as an animal laborans whose metabolism with nature would yield the highest productivity of which human life is capable. Against the background of these schematic definitions, it would be adequate for the world we have come to live in to define man as a being capable of action; for this capacity seems to have become the center of all other human capabilities.

It is beyond doubt that the capacity to act is the most dangerous of all human abilities and possibilities, and it is also beyond doubt that the self-created risks mankind faces today have never been faced before. Considerations like these are not at all meant to offer solutions or to give advice. At best, they might encourage sustained and closer reflection on the nature and the intrinsic potentialities of action, which never before has revealed its greatness and its dangers so openly.

II: HISTORY AND EARTHLY IMMORTALITY

The modern concept of process pervading history and nature alike separates the modern age from the past more profoundly than any other single idea. To our modern way of thinking nothing is meaningful in and by itself, not even history or nature taken each as a whole, and certainly not particular occurrences in the physical order or specific historical events. There is a fateful enormity in this state of affairs. Invisible processes have engulfed every tangible thing, every individual entity that is visible to us, degrading them into functions of an over-all process. The enormity of this change is likely to escape us if we allow ourselves to be misled by such generalities as the disenchantment
of the world or the alienation of man, generalities that often involve a romanticized notion of the past. What the concept of process implies is that the concrete and the general, the single thing or event and the universal meaning, have parted company. The process, which alone makes meaningful whatever it happens to carry along, has thus acquired a monopoly of universality and significance.

Certainly nothing more sharply distinguishes the modern concept of history from that of antiquity. For this distinction does not hinge on whether or not antiquity had a concept of world history or an idea of mankind as a whole. What is much more relevant is that Greek and Roman historiography, much as they differ from each other, both take it for granted that the meaning or, as the Romans would say, the lesson of each event, deed, or occurrence is revealed in and by itself. This, to be sure, does not exclude either causality or the context in which something occurs; antiquity was as aware of these as we are. But causality and context were seen in a light provided by the event itself, illuminating a specific segment of human affairs; they were not envisaged as having an independent existence of which the event would be only the more or less accidental though adequate expression. Everything that was done or happened contained and disclosed its share of “general” meaning within the confines of its individual shape and did not need a developing and engulphing process to become significant. Herodotus wanted “to say what is” (lēgōν πά τι δόντα) because saying and writing stabilize the futile and perishable, “fabricate a memory” for it, in the Greek idiom: μνῆμην ποιείσθαι; yet he never would have doubted that each thing that is or was carries its meaning within itself and needs only the word to make it manifest (λόγοις δηλούν, “to disclose through words”), to “display the great deeds in public,” ἀπὸ δεξιῶν ἔργων μεγάλων. The flux of his narrative is sufficiently loose to leave room for many stories, but there is nothing in this flux indicative that the general bestows meaning and significance on the particular.

For this shift of emphasis it is immaterial whether Greek poetry and historiography saw the meaning of the event in some surpassing greatness justifying its remembrance by posterity, or whether the Romans conceived of history as a storehouse of examples taken from actual political behavior, demonstrating what tradition, the authority of ancestors, demanded from each generation and what the past had accumulated for the benefit of the present. Our notion of historical process overrules both concepts, bestowing upon mere time-sequence an importance and dignity it never had before.

Because of this modern emphasis upon time and time-sequence, it has often been maintained that the origin of our historical consciousness lies in the Hebrew-Christian tradition, with its rectilinear time-concept and its idea of a divine providence giving to the whole of man’s historical time the unity of a plan of salvation—an idea which indeed stands as much in contrast to the insistence on individual events and occurrences of classical antiquity as to the cyclical time-speculations of late antiquity. A great deal of evidence has been cited in support of the thesis that the modern historical consciousness has a Christian religious origin and came into being through a secularization of originally theological categories. Only our religious tradition, it is said, knows of a beginning and, in the Christian version, an end of the world; if human life on earth follows a divine plan of salvation, then its mere sequence must harbor a significance independent of and transcending all single occurrences. Therefore, the argument runs, a “well-defined outline of world history” did not appear prior to Christianity, and the first philosophy of history is presented in Augustine’s De Civitate Dei. And it is true that in Augustine we find the notion that history itself, namely that which has meaning and makes sense, can be separated from the single historical events related in chronological narrative. He states explicitly that “although the past institutions of men are related in historical narrative, history itself is not to be counted among human institutions.”

This similarity between the Christian and the modern concept of history is deceptive, however. It rests on a comparison with the cyclical history-speculations of late antiquity and overlooks the classical history-concepts of Greece and Rome. The comparison is supported by the fact that Augustine himself, when he refuted pagan time-speculations, was primarily concerned with
the cyclical time-theories of his own era, which indeed no Christian could accept because of the absolute uniqueness of Christ’s life and death on earth: “Once Christ died for our sins; and rising from the dead, he dieth no more.” 

What modern interpreters are liable to forget is that Augustine claimed this uniqueness of event, which sounds so familiar to our ears, for this one event only—the supreme event in human history, when eternity, as it were, broke into the course of earthly mortality; he never claimed such uniqueness, as we do, for ordinary secular events. The simple fact that the problem of history arose in Christian thought only with Augustine should make us doubt its Christian origin, and this all the more as it arose, in terms of Augustine’s own philosophy and theology, because of an accident. The fall of Rome, occurring in his lifetime, was interpreted by Christians and pagans alike as a decisive event, and it was to the refutation of this belief that Augustine devoted thirteen years of his life. The point, as he saw it, was that no purely secular event could or should ever be of central import to man. His lack of interest in what we call history was so great that he devoted only one book of the *Civitas Dei* to secular events; and in commissioning his friend and pupil Orosius to write a “world history” he had no more in mind than a “true compilation of the evils of the world.”

Augustine’s attitude toward secular history is essentially no different from that of the Romans, albeit the emphasis is inverted: history remains a storehouse of examples, and the location of events in time within the secular course of history remains without importance. Secular history repeats itself, and the only story in which unique and unrepeatable events take place begins with Adam and ends with the birth and death of Christ. Thereafter secular powers rise and fall as in the past and will rise and fall until the world’s end, but no fundamentally new truth will ever again be revealed by such mundane events, and Christians are not supposed to attach particular significance to them. In all truly Christian philosophy man is a “pilgrim on earth,” and this fact alone separates it from our own historical consciousness. To the Christian, as to the Roman, the significance of secular events lay in their having the character of examples likely to repeat themselves, so that action could follow certain standardized patterns. (This, incidentally, is also very far removed from the Greek notion of the heroic deed, related by poets and historians, which serves as a kind of yardstick with which to measure one’s own capacities for greatness. The difference between the faithful following of a recognized example and the attempt to measure oneself against it is the difference between Roman-Christian morality and what has been called the Greek agonal spirit, which did not know any “moral” considerations but only an *άδροτευίν*, an unceasing effort always to be the best of all.) For us, on the other hand, history stands and falls on the assumption that the process in its very secularity tells a story of its own and that, strictly speaking, repetitions cannot occur.

Even more alien to the modern concept of history is the Christian notion that mankind has a beginning and an end, that the world was created in time and will ultimately perish, like all things temporal. Historical consciousness did not arise when the creation of the world was taken as the starting point for chronological enumeration, by the Jews in the Middle Ages; nor did it arise in the sixth century when Dionysus Exiguus began counting time from the birth of Christ. We know of similar schemes of chronology in Oriental civilization, and the Christian calendar imitated the Roman practice of counting time from the year of the foundation of Rome. In stark contrast stands the modern computation of historical dates, introduced only at the end of the eighteenth century, that takes the birth of Christ as a turning point from which to count time both backward and forward. This chronological reform is presented in the textbooks as a mere technical improvement, needed for scholarly purposes to facilitate the exact fixing of dates in ancient history without referring to a maze of different time-reckonings. In more recent times, Hegel inspired an interpretation which sees in the modern time system a truly Christian chronology because the birth of Christ now seems to have become the turning point of world history.

Neither of these explanations is satisfactory. Chronological reforms for scholarly purposes have occurred many times in the
past without being accepted in everyday life, precisely because they were invented for scholarly convenience only and did not correspond to any changed time-concept in society at large. The decisive thing in our system is not that the birth of Christ now appears as the turning point of world history, for it had been recognized as such and with greater force many centuries before. It was the effect of our chronology, but rather that now, for the first time, the history of mankind reaches back into an infinite past to which we can add at will and into which we can inquire further as it stretches ahead into an infinite future. This twofold infinity of past and future eliminates all notions of beginning and end, establishing mankind in a potential earthly immortality. What at first glance looks like a Christianization of world history in fact eliminates all religious time-speculations from secular history. So far as secular history is concerned we live in a process which knows no beginning and no end and which thus does not permit us to entertain eschatological expectations. Nothing could be more alien to Christian thought than this concept of an earthly immortality of mankind.

The great impact of the notion of history upon the consciousness of the modern age came relatively late, not before the last third of the eighteenth century, finding with relative quickness its climactic consummation in Hegel's philosophy. The central concept of Hegelian metaphysics is history. This alone places it in the sharpest possible opposition to all previous metaphysics, which, since Plato, had looked for truth and the revelation of eternal Being everywhere except in the realm of human affairs—πᾶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων πράγματα—of which Plato speaks with such contempt precisely because no permanence could be found in it and therefore it could not be expected to disclose truth. To think, with Hegel, that truth resides and reveals itself in the time-process itself is characteristic of all modern historical consciousness, however it expresses itself, in specifically Hegelian terms or not. The rise of the humanities in the nineteenth century was inspired by the same feeling for history and is hence clearly distinguished from the recurrent revivals of antiquity that took place in previous periods. Men now began to read, as Meinecke pointed out, as nobody had ever read before. They “read in order to force from history the ultimate truth it could offer to God-seeking people”; but this ultimate truth was no longer supposed to reside in a single book, whether the Bible or some substitute for it. History itself was considered such a book, the book “of the human soul in times and nations,” as Herder defined it.

Recent historical research has shed much new light on the transitional period between the Middle Ages and modern times, with the result that the modern age, previously assumed to have begun with the Renaissance, has been traced back into the very heart of the Middle Ages. This greater insistence on an unbroken continuity, valuable though it is, has one drawback, that by trying to bridge the gulf separating a religious culture from the secular world we live in, it bypasses, rather than solves, the great riddle of the sudden undeniable rise of the secular. If by “secularization” one means no more than the rise of the secular and the concomitant eclipse of a transcendent world, then it is undeniable that modern historical consciousness is very intimately connected with it. This, however, in no way implies the doubtful transformation of religious and transcendent categories into immanent earthly aims and standards on which the historians of ideas have recently insisted. Secularization means first of all simply the separation of religion and politics, and this affected both sides so fundamentally that nothing is less likely to have taken place than the gradual transformation of religious categories into secular concepts which the defenders of unbroken continuity try to establish. The reason they can succeed to some extent in convincing us lies in the nature of ideas in general rather than in the period with which they deal; the moment one separates an idea entirely from its basis in real experience, it is not difficult to establish a connection between it and almost any other idea. In other words, if we assume that something like an independent realm of pure ideas exists, all notions and concepts cannot but be interrelated, because then they all owe their origin to the same source: a human mind seen in its extreme subjectivity, forever playing with its own images,
unaffected by experience and with no relationship to the world, whether the world is conceived as nature or as history.

However, if we understand by secularization an event that can be dated in historical time rather than a change of ideas, then the question is not whether Hegel's "cunning of reason" was a secularization of divine providence or whether Marx's classless society represents a secularization of the Messianic Age. The fact is that the separation of church and state occurred, eliminating religion from public life, removing all religious sanctions from politics, and causing religion to lose that political element it had acquired in the centuries when the Roman Catholic Church acted as the heir of the Roman Empire. (It does not follow that this separation converted religion into an entirely "private affair." This type of privacy in religion comes about when a tyrannical regime prohibits the public functioning of churches, denying the believer the public space in which he can appear with others and be seen by them. The public-secular domain, or the political sphere, properly speaking, comprehends and has room for the public-religious sphere. A believer can be a member of a church and at the same time act as a citizen in the larger unit constituted by all belonging to the City.) This secularization was frequently brought about by men who did not doubt in the least the truth of traditional religious teaching (even Hobbes died in mortal fear of "hell-fire," and Descartes prayed to the Holy Virgin) and nothing in the sources justifies us in considering all those who prepared or helped to establish a new independent secular sphere as secret or unconscious atheists. All that we can say is that, whatever their faith or lack of it, it was without influence on the secular. Thus the political theorists of the seventeenth century accomplished secularization by separating political thinking from theology, and by insisting that the rules of natural law provided a basis for the body politic even if God did not exist. It was the same thought which made Grotius say that "even God cannot cause two times two not to make four." The point was not to deny the existence of God but to discover in the secular realm an independent, immanent meaning which even God could not alter.

It has been pointed out before that the most important consequence of the rise of the secular realm in the modern age was that belief in individual immortality—whether it be the immortality of the soul or, more importantly, the resurrection of the body—lost its politically binding force. Now indeed "it was inevitable that earthly posterity should once again become the principal substance of hope," but it does not follow from this that a secularization of the belief in a hereafter occurred or that the new attitude was essentially nothing but "a redisposition of the Christian ideas which it seeks to displace." What actually happened was that the problem of politics regained that grave and decisive relevance for the existence of men which it had been lacking since antiquity because it was irreconcilable with a strictly Christian understanding of the secular. For Greeks and Romans alike, all differences notwithstanding, the foundation of a body politic was brought about by man's need to overcome the mortality of human life and the futility of human deeds. Outside the body politic, man's life was not only and not even primarily insecure, i.e., exposed to the violence of others; it was without meaning and dignity because under no circumstances could it leave any traces behind it. That was the reason for the curse laid by Greek thinking on the whole sphere of private life, the "idiocy" of which consisted in its being concerned solely with survival, just as it was the reason for Cicero's contention that only through building and preserving political communities could human virtue attain to the ways of the gods. In other words, the secularization of the modern age once more brought to the fore that activity which Aristotle had called ἀθανασία, a term for which we have no ready equivalent in our living languages. The reason I mention this word again is that it points to an activity of "immortalizing" rather than to the object which is to become immortal. To strive for immortality can mean, as it certainly did in early Greece, the immortalization of oneself through famous deeds and the acquisition of immortal fame; it can also mean the addition to the human artifact of something more permanent than we are ourselves; and it can mean, as it did with the philosophers, the spending of one's life
with things immortal. In any event, the word designated an activity and not a belief, and what the activity required was an imperishable space guaranteeing that “immortalizing” would not be in vain.  

To us, who have been accustomed to the idea of immortality only through the lasting appeal of works of art and perhaps through the relative permanence we ascribe to all great civilizations, it may appear implausible that the drive toward immortality should lie at the foundation of political communities. To the Greeks, however, the latter might very well have been much more taken for granted than the former. Did not Pericles think that the highest praise he could bestow upon Athens was to claim that it no longer needed “a Homer or others of his craft,” but that, thanks to the polis, Athenians everywhere would leave “imperishable monuments” behind them? What Homer had done was to immortalize human deeds, and the polis could dispense with the service of “others of his craft” because it offered each of its citizens that public-political space that it assumed would confer immortality upon his acts. The growing apolitism of the philosophers after Socrates’ death, their demand to be freed from political activities and their insistence on performing a non-practical, purely theoretical ἄθεως (atheia) outside the sphere of political life had philosophical as well as political causes, but among the political ones was certainly the increasing decay of polis life, making even the permanence, let alone immortality, of this particular body politic more and more doubtful.

The apolitism of ancient philosophy foreshadowed the much more radical anti-political attitude of early Christianity, which, however, in its very extremism survived only so long as the Roman Empire provided a stable body politic for all nations and all religions. During these early centuries of our era the conviction that things earthly are perishable remained a religious matter and was the belief of those who wanted to have nothing to do with political affairs. This changed decisively with the crucial experience of the fall of Rome, the sacking of the Eternal City, after which no age ever again believed that any human product, least of all a political structure, could endure forever. As far as Christian thought was concerned, this was a mere reaffirmation of its beliefs. It was of no great relevance, as Augustine pointed out. To Christians only individual men were immortal, but nothing else of this world, neither mankind as a whole nor the earth itself, least of all the human artifact. Only by transcending this world could immortalizing activities be performed, and the only institution that could be justified within the secular realm was the Church, the Civitas Dei on earth, to which had fallen the burden of political responsibility and into which all genuinely political impulses could be drawn. That this transformation of Christianity and its earlier anti-political impulses into a great and stable political institution was possible at all without complete perversion of the Gospel is almost wholly due to Augustine, who, though hardly the father of our concept of history, is probably the spiritual author and certainly the greatest theorist of Christian politics. What was decisive in this respect was that he, still firmly rooted in the Roman tradition, could add to the Christian notion of an everlasting life the idea of a future civitas, a Civitas Dei, where men even in the hereafter would continue to live in a community. Without this reformulation of Christian thoughts through Augustine, Christian politics might have remained what they had been in the early centuries, a contradiction in terms. Augustine could solve the dilemma because the language itself came to his help: in Latin the word “to live” had always coincided with in ter homines esse, “to be in the company of men,” so that an everlasting life in Roman interpretation was bound to mean that no man would ever have to part from human company even though in death he had to leave the earth. Thus the fact of the plurality of men, one of the fundamental prerequisites of political life, bound human “nature” even under the conditions of individual immortality, and was not among the characteristics which this “nature” had acquired after Adam’s fall and which made politics in the mere secular sense a necessity for the sinful life on earth. Augustine’s conviction that some kind of political life must exist even under conditions of sinlessness, and indeed sanctity, he summed up in one sentence: Socialis est vita
sanctorum, even the life of the saints is a life together with other men.  

If the insight into the perishability of all human creations had no great relevance for Christian thought and could even in its greatest thinker be in accord with a conception of politics beyond the secular realm, it became very troublesome in the modern age when the secular sphere of human life had emancipated itself from religion. The separation of religion and politics meant that no matter what an individual might believe as a member of a church, as a citizen he acted and behaved on the assumption of human mortality. Hobbes's fear of hell-fire did not influence in the least his construction of government as the Leviathan, a mortal god to overawe all men. Politically speaking, within the secular realm itself secularization meant nothing more or less than that men once more had become mortals. If this led them to a rediscovery of antiquity, which we call humanism, and in which Greek and Roman sources spoke again a much more familiar language corresponding to experiences much more similar to their own, it certainly did not allow them in practice to mold their behavior in accordance with either the Greek or the Roman example. The ancient trust in the world's being more permanent than individual men and in political structures as a guarantee of earthly survival after death did not return, so that the ancient opposition of a mortal life to a more or less immortal world failed them. Now both life and world had become perishable, mortal, and futile.

Today we find it difficult to grasp that this situation of absolute mortality could be unbearable to men. However, looking back upon the development of the modern age up to the beginning of our own, the modern world, we see that centuries passed before we became accustomed to the notion of absolute mortality, so that the thought of it no longer bothers us and the old alternative between an individual immortal life in a mortal world and a mortal life in an immortal world has ceased to be meaningful. In this respect, however, as in many others, we differ from all previous ages. Our concept of history, though essentially a concept of the modern age, owes its existence to the transition period when religious confidence in immortal life had lost its influence upon the secular and the new indifference toward the question of immortality had not yet been born.

If we leave aside the new indifference and stay within the limits of the traditional alternative, bestowing immortality either upon life or upon the world, then it is obvious that ἐναποτικόν, immortalizing, as an activity of mortal men, can be meaningful only if there is no guarantee of life in the hereafter. At that moment, however, it becomes almost a necessity as long as there is any concern with immortality whatsoever. It was therefore in the course of its search for a strictly secular realm of enduring permanence that the modern age discovered the potential immortality of mankind. This is what is manifestly expressed in our calendar; it is the actual content of our concept of history. History, stretching into the twofold infinity of past and future, can guarantee immortality on earth in much the same way as the Greek polis or the Roman republic had guaranteed that human life and human deeds, insofar as they disclosed something essential and something great, would receive a strictly human and earthly permanence in this world. The great advantage of this concept has been that the twofold infinity of the historical process establishes a time-space in which the very notion of an end is virtually inconceivable, whereas its great disadvantage, compared with ancient political theory, seems to be that permanence is entrusted to a flowing process, as distinguished from a stable structure. At the same time the immortalizing process has become independent of cities, states, and nations; it encompasses the whole of mankind, whose history Hegel was consequently able to see as one uninterrupted development of the Spirit. Therewith mankind ceases to be only a species of nature; and what distinguishes man from the animals is no longer merely that he has speech (λόγον ἔχων), as in the Aristotelian definition, or that he has reason, as in the medieval definition (animal rationale); his very life now distinguishes him, the one thing that in the traditional definition he was supposed to share with the animals. In the words of Droysen, who was perhaps the most thoughtful of the nineteenth-century historians: "What their species is for animals and plants . . . that is history for human beings."
III: HISTORY AND POLITICS

While it is obvious that our historical consciousness would never have been possible without the rise of the secular realm to a new dignity, it was not so obvious that the historical process would eventually be called upon to bestow the necessary new meaning and significance upon men's deeds and sufferings on earth. And indeed, at the beginning of the modern age everything pointed to an elevation of political action and political life, and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, so rich in new political philosophies, were still quite unaware of any special emphasis on history as such. Their concern, on the contrary, was to get rid of the past rather than to rehabilitate the historical process. The distinguishing trait of Hobbes's philosophy is his single-minded insistence on the future and the resulting teleological interpretation of thought as well as of action. The conviction of the modern age that man can know only that which he himself has made seems to be in accordance with a glorification of action rather than with the basically contemplative attitude of the historian and of historical consciousness in general.

Thus one of the reasons for Hobbes's break with traditional philosophy was that while all previous metaphysics had followed Aristotle in holding that the inquiry into the first causes of everything that is comprises the chief task of philosophy, it was Hobbes's contention that, on the contrary, the task of philosophy was to guide purposes and aims and to establish a reasonable teleology of action. So important was this point to Hobbes that he insisted that animals too are capable of discovering causes and that therefore this cannot be the true distinction between human and animal life; he found the distinction instead in the ability to reckon with "the effects of some present or past cause... of which I have not at any time seen any sign but in man only." The modern age not only produced at its very start a new and radical political philosophy—Hobbes is only one example, though perhaps the most interesting—it also produced for the first time philosophers willing to orient themselves according to the requirements of the political realm; and this new political orientation is present not only in Hobbes but, mutatis mutandis, in Locke and Hume as well. It can be said that Hegel's transformation of metaphysics into a philosophy of history was preceded by an attempt to get rid of metaphysics for the sake of a philosophy of politics.

In any consideration of the modern concept of history one of the crucial problems is to explain its sudden rise during the last third of the eighteenth century and the concomitant decrease of interest in purely political thinking. (Vico must be said to be a forerunner whose influence was not felt until more than two generations after his death.) Where a genuine interest in political theory still survived it ended in despair, as in Tocqueville, or in the confusion of politics with history, as in Marx. For what else but despair could have inspired Tocqueville's assertion that "since the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future the mind of man wanders in obscurity"? This is actually the conclusion of the great work in which he had "delineated the society of the modern world" and in the introduction to which he had proclaimed that "a new science of politics is needed for a new world." And what else but confusion—a merciful confusion for Marx himself and a fatal one for his followers—could have led to Marx's identification of action with "the making of history"?

Marx's notion of "making history" had an influence far beyond the circle of convinced Marxists or determined revolutionaries. Although it is closely connected with Vico's idea that history was made by man, as distinguished from "nature," which was made by God, the difference between them is still decisive. For Vico, as later for Hegel, the importance of the concept of history was primarily theoretical. It never occurred to either of them to apply this concept directly by using it as a principle of action. Truth they conceived of as being revealed to the contemplative, backward-directed glance of the historian, who, by being able to see the process as a whole, is in a position to overlook the "narrow aims" of acting men, concentrating instead on the "higher aims" that realize themselves behind their backs (Vico). Marx, on the other hand, combined this notion of history with the teleological political philosophies of the earlier stages of the modern age, so that in his thought the "higher
goals and intentions. It is as though men were stricken suddenly blind to fundamental distinctions such as the distinction between meaning and end, between the general and the particular, or, grammatically speaking, the distinction between “for the sake of . . .” and “in order to . . .” (as though the carpenter, for instance, forgot that only his particular acts in making a table are performed in the mode of “in order to,” but that his whole life as a carpenter is ruled by something quite different, namely an encompassing notion “for the sake of” which he became a carpenter in the first place). And the moment such distinctions are forgotten and meanings are degraded into ends, it follows that ends themselves are no longer safe because the distinction between means and ends is no longer understood, so that finally all ends turn and are degraded into means.

In this version of deriving politics from history, or rather, political conscience from historical consciousness—by no means restricted to Marx in particular, or even to pragmatism in general—we can easily detect the age-old attempt to escape from the frustrations and fragility of human action by construing it in the image of making. What distinguishes Marx’s own theory from all others in which the notion of “making history” has found a place is only that he alone realized that if one takes history to be the object of a process of fabrication or making, there must come a moment when this “object” is completed, and that if one imagines that one can “make history,” one cannot escape the consequence that there will be an end to history. Whenever we hear of grandiose aims in politics, such as establishing a new society in which justice will be guaranteed forever, or fighting a war to end all wars or to make the whole world safe for democracy, we are moving in the realm of this kind of thinking.

In this context, it is important to see that here the process of history, as it shows itself in our calendar’s stretching into the infinity of the past and the future, has been abandoned for the sake of an altogether different kind of process, that of making something which has a beginning as well as an end, whose laws of motion, therefore, can be determined (for instance, as dialectical movement) and whose innermost content can be discovered
particular formula is correct. In all such attempts what is considered to be a meaning is in fact no more than a pattern, and within the limitations of utilitarian thought nothing but patterns can make sense, because only patterns can be “made,” whereas meanings cannot be, but, like truth, will only disclose or reveal themselves. Marx was only the first—and still the greatest, among historians—to mistake a pattern for a meaning, and he certainly could hardly have been expected to realize that there was almost no pattern into which the events of the past would not have fitted as neatly and consistently as they did into his own. Marx’s pattern at least was based on one important historical insight; since then we have seen historians freely imposing upon the maze of past facts almost any pattern they wish, with the result that the ruin of the factual and particular through the seemingly higher validity of general “meanings” has even undermined the basic factual structure of all historical process, that is, chronology.

Moreover, Marx construed his pattern as he did because of his concern with action and impatience with history. He is the last of those thinkers who stand at the borderline between the modern age’s earlier interest in politics and its later preoccupation with history. One might mark the point where the modern age abandoned its earlier attempts to establish a new political philosophy for its rediscovery of the secular by recalling the moment at which the French Revolutionary calendar was given up, after one decade, and the Revolution was re-integrated, as it were, into the historical process with its twofold extension toward infinity. It was as though it was conceded that not even the Revolution, which, along with the promulgation of the American Constitution, is still the greatest event in modern political history, contained sufficient independent meaning in itself to begin a new historical process. For the Republican calendar was abandoned not merely because of Napoleon’s wish to rule an empire and to be considered the equal of the crowned heads of Europe. The abandonment also implied the refusal, despite the re-establishment of the secular, to accept the conviction of the ancients that political actions are meaningful regardless of their historical location, and especially a repudiation of the Roman
faith in the sacredness of foundations with the accompanying
custom of numbering time from the foundation date. Indeed,
the French Revolution, which was inspired by the Roman spirit
and appeared to the world, as Marx liked to say, in Roman
dress, reversed itself in more than one sense.

An equally important landmark in the shift from the earlier
concern with politics to the later concern with history is en-
countered in Kant’s political philosophy. Kant, who had greeted
in Rousseau “the Newton of the moral world,” and had been
greeted by his contemporaries as the theorist of the Rights of
Man, still had great difficulty in coping with the new idea of
history, which had probably come to his attention in the writ-
ings of Herder. He is one of the last philosophers to complain in
earnest about the “meaningless course of human affairs,” the
“melancholy haphazardness” of historical events and develop-
ments, this hopeless, senseless “mixture of error and violence,”
as Goethe once defined history. Yet Kant also saw what others
had seen before him, that once you look at history in its en-
tirety (im Grossen), rather than at single events and the ever-
frustrated intentions of human agents, everything suddenly
makes sense, because there is always at least a story to tell.
The process as a whole appears to be guided by an “intention
of nature” unknown to acting men but comprehensible to
those who come after them. By pursuing their own aims with-
out rhyme or reason men seem to be led by “the guiding
thread of reason.”

It is of some importance to notice that Kant, like Vico before
him, was already aware of what Hegel later called “the cunning
of reason” (Kant occasionally called it “the ruse of nature”).
He even had some rudimentary insight into historical dialectics,
as when he pointed out that nature pursues its over-all aims
through “the antagonism of men in society . . . without which
men, good-natured like the sheep they tend, would hardly
know how to give a higher value to their own existence than is
possessed by their cattle.” This shows to what extent the very
idea of history as a process suggests that in their actions men
are led by something of which they are not necessarily con-
scious and which finds no direct expression in the action itself.

Or, to put it another way, it shows how extremely useful the
modern concept of history proved to be in giving the secular
political realm a meaning which it otherwise seemed to be de-
void of. In Kant, in contrast to Hegel, the motive for the mod-
ern escape from politics into history is still quite clear. It is the
escape into the “whole,” and the escape is prompted by the
meaninglessness of the particular. And since Kant’s primary
interest was still in the nature and principles of political (or, as he
would say, moral) action, he was able to perceive the crucial
drawback of the new approach, the one great stumbling block
which no philosophy of history and no concept of progress can
ever remove. In Kant’s own words: “It will always remain be-
wildering . . . that the earlier generations seem to carry on their
burdensome business only for the sake of the later . . . and that
only the last should have the good fortune to dwell in the [com-
pleted] building.”

The bewildered regret and great diffidence with which Kant
resigned himself to introducing a concept of history into his po-
thetical philosophy indicates with rare precision the nature of the
perplexities which caused the modern age to shift its emphasis
from a theory of politics—apparently so much more appropri-
ate to its belief in the superiority of action to contemplation—to
an essentially contemplative philosophy of history. For Kant
was perhaps the only great thinker to whom the question
“What shall I do?” was not only as relevant as the two other
questions of metaphysics, “What can I know?” and “What may
I hope?” but formed the very center of his philosophy. There-
fore he was not troubled, as even Marx and Nietzsche were still
troubled, by the traditional hierarchy of contemplation over ac-
tion, the vita contemplativa over the vita activa; his problem
was rather another traditional hierarchy which, because it is
hidden and rarely articulate, has proved much more difficult to
overcome, the hierarchy within the vita activa itself, where the
acting of the statesman occupies the highest position, the mak-
ing of the craftsman and artist an intermediary, and the labor-
ning which provides the necessities for the functioning of the
human organism the lowest. (Marx was later to reverse this hi-
erarchy too, although he wrote explicitly only about elevating
action over contemplation and changing the world as against interpreting it. In the course of this reversal he had to upset the traditional hierarchy within the *vita activa* as well, by putting the lowest of human activities, the activity of labor, into the highest place. Action now appeared to be no more than a function of "the productive relationships" of mankind brought about by labor.) It is true that traditional philosophy often pays only lip service to the estimate of action as the highest activity of man, preferring the so much more reliable activity of making, so that the hierarchy within the *vita activa* has hardly ever been fully articulated. It is a sign of the political rank of Kant's philosophy that the old perplexities inherent in action were brought to the fore again.

However that may be, Kant could not but become aware of the fact that action fulfilled neither of the two hopes the modern age was bound to expect from it. If the secularization of our world implies the revival of the old desire for some kind of earthly immortality, then human action, especially in its political aspect, must appear singularly inadequate to meet the demands of the new age. From the point of view of motivation, action appears to be the least interesting and most futile of all human pursuits: "Passions, private aims, and the satisfaction of selfish desires, are ... the most effective springs of action," and "the facts of known history," taken by themselves, "possess neither a common basis nor continuity nor coherence" (Vico). From the viewpoint of achievement, on the other hand, action appears at once to be more futile and more frustrating than the activities of laboring and of producing objects. Human deeds, unless they are remembered, are the most futile and perishable things on earth; they hardly outlast the activity itself and certainly by themselves can never aspire to that permanence which even ordinary use-objects possess when they outlast their maker's life, not to mention works of art, which speak to us over the centuries. Human action, projected into a web of relationships where many and opposing ends are pursued, almost never fulfills its original intention; no act can ever be recognized by its author as his own with the same happy certainty with which a piece of work of any kind can be recognized by its maker. Whoever begins to act must know that he has started something whose end he can never foretell, if only because his own deed has already changed everything and made it even more unpredictable. That is what Kant had in mind when he spoke of the "melancholy haphazardness" (trostlose Ungefähr) which is so striking in the record of political history. "Action: one does not know its origin, one does not know its consequences—therefore, does action possess any value at all?" Were not the old philosophers right, and was it not madness to expect any meaning to arise out of the realm of human affairs?

For a long time it seemed that these inadequacies and perplexities within the *vita activa* could be solved by ignoring the peculiarities of action and by insisting upon the "meaningfulness" of the process of history in its entirety, which seemed to give to the political sphere that dignity and final redemption from "melancholy haphazardness" so obviously required. History—based on the manifest assumption that no matter how haphazard single actions may appear in the present and in their singularity, they inevitably lead to a sequence of events forming a story that can be rendered through intelligible narrative the moment the events are removed into the past—became the great dimension in which men could become "reconciled" with reality (Hegel), the reality of human affairs, i.e., of things which owe their existence exclusively to men. Moreover, since history in its modern version was conceived primarily as a process, it showed a peculiar and inspiring affinity to action, which, indeed, in contrast to all other human activities, consists first of all of starting processes—a fact of which human experience has of course always been aware, even though the preoccupation of philosophy with making as the model of human activity has prevented the elaboration of an articulate terminology and precise description. The very notion of process, which is so highly characteristic of modern science, both natural and historical, probably had its origin in this fundamental experience of action, to which secularization lent an emphasis such as it had not known since the very early centuries of Greek culture, even before the rise of the polis and certainly before the victory of the Socratic school. History in its modern version could come to terms with this
experience; and though it failed to save politics itself from the old disgrace, though the single deeds and acts constituting the realm of politics, properly speaking, were left in limbo, it has at least bestowed upon the record of past events that share of earthly immortality to which the modern age necessarily aspired, but which its acting men no longer dared to claim from posterity.

EPILOGUE

Today the Kantian and Hegelian way of becoming reconciled to reality through understanding the innermost meaning of the entire historical process seems to be quite as much refuted by our experience as the simultaneous attempt of pragmatism and utilitarianism to “make history” and impose upon reality the preconceived meaning and law of man. While trouble throughout the modern age has as a rule started with the natural sciences and has been the consequence of experience gained in the attempt to know the universe, this time the refutation rises simultaneously out of the physical and political fields. The trouble is that almost every axiom seems to lend itself to consistent deductions and this to such an extent that it is as though men were in a position to prove almost any hypothesis they might choose to adopt, not only in the field of purely mental constructions like the various over-all interpretations of history which are all equally well supported by facts, but in the natural sciences as well.  

As far as natural science is concerned, this brings us back to the previously quoted statement by Heisenberg (pp. 48–49), whose consequence he once formulated in a different context as the paradox that man, whenever he tries to learn about things which neither are himself nor owe their existence to him, will ultimately encounter nothing but himself, his own constructions, and the patterns of his own actions. This is no longer a question of academic objectivity. It cannot be solved by the reflection that man as a question-asking being naturally can receive only answers to match his own questions. If nothing more was involved, then we would be satisfied that different questions put “to one and the same physical event” reveal different but objectively equally “true” aspects of the same phenomenon, just as the table around which a number of people have taken their places is seen by each of them in a different aspect, without thereby ceasing to be the object common to all of them. One could even imagine that a theory of theories, like the old mathesis universalis, might eventually be able to determine how many such questions are possible or how many “different types of natural law” can be applied to the same natural universe without contradiction.

The matter would become somewhat more serious if it turned out that no question exists at all which does not lead to a consistent set of answers—a perplexity we mentioned earlier when we discussed the distinction between pattern and meaning. In this instance the very distinction between meaningful and meaningless questions would disappear together with absolute truth, and the consistency we would be left with could just as well be the consistency of an asylum for paranoiacs or the consistency of the current demonstrations of the existence of God. However, what is really undermining the whole modern notion that meaning is contained in the process as a whole, from which the particular occurrence derives its intelligibility, is that not only can we prove this, in the sense of consistent deduction, but we can take almost any hypothesis and act upon it, with a sequence of results in reality which not only make sense but work. This means quite literally that everything is possible not only in the realm of ideas but in the field of reality itself.

In my studies of totalitarianism I tried to show that the totalitarian phenomenon, with its striking anti-utilitarian traits and its strange disregard for factuality, is based in the last analysis on the conviction that everything is possible—and not just permitted, morally or otherwise, as was the case with early nihilism. The totalitarian systems tend to demonstrate that action can be based on any hypothesis and that, in the course of consistently guided action, the particular hypothesis will become true, will become actual, factual reality. The assumption which underlies consistent action can be as mad as it pleases; it will
always end in producing facts which are then "objectively" true. What was originally nothing but a hypothesis, to be proved or disproved by actual facts, will in the course of consistent action always turn into a fact, never to be disproved. In other words, the axiom from which the deduction is started does not need to be, as traditional metaphysics and logic supposed, a self-evident truth; it does not have to tally at all with the facts as given in the objective world at the moment the action starts; the process of action, if it is consistent, will proceed to create a world in which the assumption becomes axiomatic and self-evident.

The frightening arbitrariness with which we are confronted whenever we decide to embark upon this type of action, which is the exact counterpart of consistent logical processes, is even more obvious in the political than in the natural realm. But it is more difficult to convince people that this holds true for past history. The historian, by gazing backward into the historical process, has been so accustomed to discovering an "objective" meaning, independent of the aims and awareness of the actors, that he is liable to overlook what actually happened in his attempt to discern some objective trend. He will, for example, overlook the particular characteristics of Stalin's totalitarian dictatorship in favor of the industrialization of the Soviet empire or of the nationalistic aims of traditional Russian foreign policy.

Within the natural sciences things are not essentially different, but they appear more convincing because they are so far removed from the competence of the layman and his healthy, stubborn common sense, which refuses to see what it cannot understand. Here too, thinking in terms of processes, on the one hand, and the conviction, on the other, that I know only what I have myself made, has led to the complete meaningless-ness inevitably resulting from the insight that I can choose to do whatever I want and some kind of "meaning" will always be the consequence. In both instances the perplexity is that the particular incident, the observable fact or single occurrence of nature, or the reported deed and event of history, have ceased to make sense without a universal process in which they are

supposedly embedded; yet the moment man approaches this process in order to escape the haphazard character of the particular, in order to find meaning—order and necessity—his effort is rebutted by the answer from all sides: Any order, any necessity, any meaning you wish to impose will do. This is the clearest possible demonstration that under these conditions there is neither necessity nor meaning. It is as though the "melancholy haphazardness" of the particular had now caught up with us and were pursuing us into the very region where the generations before us had fled in order to escape it. The decisive factor in this experience, both in nature and in history, is not the patterns with which we tried to "explain," and which in the social and historical sciences cancel each other out more quickly, because they can all be consistently proved, than they do in the natural sciences, where matters are more complex and for this technical reason less open to the irrelevant arbitrariness of irresponsible opinions. These opinions, to be sure, have an altogether different source, but are liable to cloud the very relevant issue of contingency, with which we are everywhere confronted today. What is decisive is that our technology, which nobody can accuse of not functioning, is based on these principles, and that our social techniques, whose real field of experimentation lies in the totalitarian countries, have only to overcome a certain time-lag to be able to do for the world of human relations and human affairs as much as has already been done for the world of human artifacts.

The modern age, with its growing world-alienation, has led to a situation where man, wherever he goes, encounters only himself. All the processes of the earth and the universe have revealed themselves either as man-made or as potentially man-made. These processes, after having devoured, as it were, the solid objectivity of the given, ended by rendering meaningless the one over-all process which originally was conceived in order to give meaning to them, and to act, so to speak, as the eternal time-space into which they could all flow and thus be rid of their mutual conflicts and exclusiveness. This is what happened to our concept of history, as it happened to our concept of nature. In the situation of radical world-alienation, neither history
nor nature is at all conceivable. This twofold loss of the world—the loss of nature and the loss of human artifice in the widest sense, which would include all history—has left behind it a society of men who, without a common world which would at once relate and separate them, either live in desperate lonely separation or are pressed together into a mass. For a mass-society is nothing more than that kind of organized living which automatically establishes itself among human beings who are still related to one another but have lost the world once common to all of them.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, it might have been wiser to ask in the title: What was—and not what is—authority? For it is my contention that we are tempted and entitled to raise this question because authority has vanished from the modern world. Since we can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experiences common to all, the very term has become clouded by controversy and confusion. Little about its nature appears self-evident or even comprehensible to everybody, except that the political scientist may still remember that this concept was once fundamental to political theory, or that most will agree that a constant, ever-widening and deepening crisis of authority has accompanied the development of the modern world in our century.

This crisis, apparent since the inception of the century, is political in origin and nature. The rise of political movements intent upon replacing the party system, and the development of a new totalitarian form of government, took place against a background of a more or less general, more or less dramatic breakdown of all traditional authorities. Nowhere was this breakdown the direct result of the regimes or movements themselves; it rather seemed as though totalitarianism, in the form of movements as well as of regimes, was best fitted to take advantage of a general political and social atmosphere in which the party system had lost its prestige and the government’s authority was no longer recognized.

The most significant symptom of the crisis, indicating its