

MAN IS THE MEASURE

by

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The Athenaeum Society

September 6, 1990

Earlier this year, a serious catastrophe occurred when a large number of Moslem faithful lost their lives in a panic which occurred in a tunnel in Mecca. Moslems from all over the world were concentrated there as a part of their annual "Hadj," fulfilling their religious obligation. When the king of Saudi Arabia was questioned as to whether adequate precautions had been taken by the government, his reply was, "It is the will of Allah and these individuals would have died at that precise instant wherever they might have been."

This same kind of fatalism was exhibited, from an entirely different cultural and religious background, by Daniel Boone when describing how he maintained his composure alone in the wilderness of Kentucky in the winter of 1770. Boone wrote "...I firmly believe it requires but a little philosophy to make a man happy in whatsoever state he is. This consists in a full resignation to the will of Providence; and a resigned soul finds pleasure in a path strewn with briars and thorns." Boone said that when he made his solitary camp at night, he slept with serenity, believing, if God so ordered it, he would arise safely in spite of all the savages and wild beasts of the universe, and if God ordained otherwise, the entire British Army could not protect him.

This "what is to be will be" attitude, whether based on God, Nature, Fate, Chance, or whatever, has furnished comfort in an alien and incomprehensible world to millions in every age and it still does. It is a matter of faith and not subject to reasonable analysis. Taken to its logical conclusion, it reduces the study of history, as well as other disciplines, to theology or an

occasionally amusing, but incidental, pastime. Not wishing to deny the sovereignty of the Divine, most of us accept the idea that it contains enough latitude to enable us to order our lives for better or worse, and we feel that the more we understand about the causes of human events, the better we can understand and, to a degree, cope with them.

Why do the large events in the human story occur as they do? History is useless without some sort of answer and all men are, of necessity, concerned with that answer. To those who are unwilling to accept "fate," the search for a rational alternative is vital. We seek logic and reason and order in the world. We want it to make sense. Our understanding may be partial and our theories simplistic, but they are a necessity for all - the ignorant as well as the learned, the savage as well as the sophisticate.

The Greek historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, found the answer in the unending repetitive cycle of history. Everything that happens has happened before and will happen again in exactly the same way. On the one hand, that would make an accurate knowledge of the past an ideal and certain prediction of the future; but, on the other hand, it wouldn't matter because it couldn't be altered. This is simply a variation of "fate."

Thomas Carlyle, British historian, endeavoring to build a general pattern by which knowledge of the past could be organized, subscribed to the "Great Man" theory. He wrote: "In all epochs of the world's history, we shall find the Great Man to have been the indispensable Saviour of his epoch; - the lightning, without which the

fuel would never have burnt." The History of the World...was the Biography of Great Men.

According to this point of view, events are an inchoate aimless mass until harnessed by the appearance of a great personality who gives direction to his era. For instance, could World War **II** have occurred without Hitler? Could Communism have triumphed without Lenin in Russia in 1917? Could the Union have prevailed without Lincoln? We will never know the answer to these questions, but certainly history would not have developed as it did without these leaders. This does little, however, to explain those long and influential eras in which no solitary leader dominated. One recalls, for instance, the Industrial Revolution and the Urban Revolution, when there were many leaders, each making an important, but not singularly decisive contribution. Man is obviously more than just a political animal.

Arnold Toynbee, another British historian, has compared civilizations and cultures to a great living organism, which inevitably advances through stages analagous to physical growth, maturity, and degeneration. The elderly and naturally decrepit Roman Empire is replaced by the immature, but vital, Franks. His is a sort of physiological approach to culture and the body politic. This idea seems to explain changes on a massive scale better than those relating to a single nation or less.

Charles A. Beard, an American historian, who won fame with an economic interpretation of the Constitution, made a strong case for economic interests as the determinative factor in history, as did Max Weber, in his classic work defending the thesis that material progress in the West has been a result of the Protestant

sanctification of work and industry. No one, however, has been as influential in promoting economic motivation as Karl Marx and his disciple, Vladimir Lenin. Marx regarded economic motivations and interests as the most critical actions of human beings, and the dominant characteristic of a historical epoch as its prevailing system of economic production. He felt societies are formed around the means of production, around the principal ways that human beings make a living. The political system, the religious system, and the cultural system that develop must conform to the necessities of the economic system and social system which form around the economic realities of life.

Communist historians have consistently considered history as accurate only when it fits this economic theory. Pokrovsky wrote: "Most importantly, we must unite the historical work we are carrying out with the proletariat's fight against wage slavery. Where this union is not achieved, there is no genuine Leninist history." As Bill Townsend quoted Cassius Marcellus Clay when he was asked how he could free all his slaves and his cousin, Henry, could not, "When somebody says, 'Taint the money, it's the principle of the thing,' it's the money."

So where does all this lead us as we try to formulate some system to explain why things develop as they do? Or can we deal with ourselves as we sometime do in frustration with small children who consistently ask, "Why?" and simply reply, "Because."

Admittedly, Great Men play a key role in directing events, and, admittedly, society can be considered a composite, living organism. It is also difficult to argue against the economic motive in a

materialistic society. My own perception of the "why" of events is based, not on these, but on the unchanging consistency of basic human nature. The focus should be on man, not on events, if any order or system is to be found. Psychologically, modern man, though subject to stresses that differ, is the same as man at the dawn of history and the physiological needs and patterns are constant as well. Great men and small men may react differently to the same stimuli and cultural perceptions may differ, but the basic needs remain the same. There is no need to submit to blind fate or to artificial patterns. I am now about to reveal to a breathless world, with becoming modesty, eternal truth. I do admit, reluctantly, a debt to Beard, who was once asked if he could write a comprehensive history of the world in a text light enough to be carried. He replied that he could write the history of mankind in a few sentences. I agree.

First, hope persists. "When it is dark enough, you can see the stars." You cannot completely extinguish hope in any sizable number of people or for any great length of time. "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here" applies to the realm of the dead (in Dante's *Inferno*), not the living. It is built into the genetic inheritance of the human race.

Second, power destroys. "Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad with power." Power abhors a vacuum and no society can exist in its absence, but it consumes its practitioners. As Abraham Lincoln, who was intimately acquainted with the truth of this adage, quoted the man about to be ridden out of town on a rail, "If it weren't for the honor, I would just as soon walk." The saying, "Power corrupts: absolute power corrupts absolutely" is commonly attributed to Lord Acton, but it probably goes back to Adam.

Third, justice prevails. "The mill of the gods grinds slowly, but it grinds exceedingly fine." The truth of this adage is what maintains the hope that persists.

As the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras said, "Man is the Measure." The events of the past, and the present, make sense to the degree that we understand human nature, which evaluates and interprets them. This philosophy of Protagoras, called "Sophism," seemed to many to lead to dire consequences in ancient Athens. Accused of it, Socrates was sentenced to death as a destroyer of morality and the civic gods. It is this same fear that leads many to condemn what they perceive as "Humanism" in the modern era. Using man as the measure when making moral or ethical judgments inevitably results in moral relativism and situational ethical standards.

However, in using man, or human nature, as the basis for understanding human behavior, which is the essential purpose of the study of history, including current events, no moral judgment is necessary or implied. Indeed, it can be dangerous. The process of understanding "that which is" and of evaluating it as good or bad is not necessarily the same. To understand the rise of Nazism is not to approve of it, and to understand the longing for basic human rights is not to disapprove of it. Knowledge and judgment are different functions of the human psyche.