

ROMAN HISTORY AND TO-DAY

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THOSE who believe that history can satisfy more than mere curiosity have an obligation to fulfil in these days of intellectual bewilderment. Any completed human pattern has a meaning; and if that meaning can be isolated and rendered coherent, it must necessarily help to explain our own society to ourselves. Sometimes one thinks that the *furor* Spengler set going was not caused so much by his conclusions as by the fact that he attempted to utilize history to explain his own time and to predict the future. The academicians particularly hated him, and people do not hate unless they are afraid. Spengler, however wrong he may have been, exposed their deficiencies, the main one of which was their eclecticism. I suppose history is more or less a science; but, notwithstanding, the symbols it uses are the symbols of the man in the street; namely, words. And in this very respect history ought to have a different application from that of the special sciences.

Words seem capable of meaning almost anything, and anyone who uses them carelessly (or even traditionally) ought to receive the same treatment as the scientist who cannot add correctly. Therefore, as everything a man writes is affected by his own personal attitude, it seems inaccurate for him to omit stating that personal attitude. To state it is to make a definite step towards refining one's logic. The personal attitude of the present writer, then, is the not uncommon belief that we have reached the end of an era, though not of our civilization; and that the history of the Romans, whose vast civilization reached an end *for itself*, can throw much light on our own predicament to-day.

It should be an axiom, by this time, that knowledge is not only relative to two units, the knower and the known, but also, considered as a general term, a process. In so far as it is a process, it is conditioned by the period in which the knower lives, and by his own understanding of that period. Nothing, therefore, that is known by word-symbols can be absolute; and conversely, the knowledge represented by word-symbols is in process of growth and refinement. Apply this axiom to history, and see what happened.

The Greeks of Marathon and Plataea were more or less uneducated, very religious and quite superstitious. Their deliverance from the overwhelming number of Persians who attacked their liberty seemed a wonder to them, but the wonder did not seem a

miracle. They believed that the gods were actively jealous of mankind, and potently helped their favourites and destroyed those they disliked. Herodotus, the historian of this period, included the *deus ex machina* in his conception of causality.

Thucydides, who saw the decay of a great and sophisticated power, did not need to go to the supernatural to find the explanation of it. He observed that the same attributes which had brought about the greatness of Athens had also driven her to her downfall. But he had no sense of time, having had no real historian of another era to fall back on. The state, the macrocosm, seemed to him to operate in the world much as the individual, the microcosm, operated on the stage in the tragic drama of his time.

In the 19th century *things* were more complex, but there were two strong trends which affected the historians, both of which were based on two aspects of the science which the Victorians, some of them, fancied would explain everything. Those influenced by one trend came to believe that everything was mechanistic, and the most notable of these was likely Marx. He himself, however, admitted that he "could not be a Marxist". The followers of the other trend, in spite of their achievement, produced one pernicious result. Their trend was to shut up their study in a close compartment like a special science, on the assumption that history could be treated as a science pure and simple. Mommsen's monumental industry profoundly affected the historians of the whole world. His insistence on sources led him to the study of inscriptions that resulted in the famous *Berlin Corpus*; written evidence was superseded by the prosaic statements on the stone documents, and the historian could now paraphrase Corregio's remark when he first saw Raphael's work, and say: "I, too, am a scientist". Robert von Ranke established that the function of the historian was to relate *was eigentlich gewesen ist*, what really happened.

We, to-day, are faced with the result of this, which now has become a tradition. Its apotheosis, one might say, is the Ph.D. degree. Is everyone entirely satisfied with the achievement of which this trademark is the guarantee? Is "what really happened" all that concerns the historian? The austere circumstances in which we find ourselves to-day are also our teachers. No one would recommend that an historian react against his factual predecessors by adopting the charlatan methods of a Suetonius or a Macaulay.

Faced with these results, what are we to say? In these troublous times the traditionalists are generally discredited. All

people but the young have been discredited; and if the young have escaped thus far, the main reason is that the world has no longer room to give them a vantage place from which they can be vocal; in other words, a good job. The result is that we, in our process, accepting as we do a tradition much discredited, must go back to fundamental principles. Look where you will, you will find the question asked: "What is the use of it?" And one sees Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler harnessing and expressing obscure forces. Mussolini calls himself a man of destiny. Napoleon said that politics was destiny. We hear to-day that economics is destiny. And from all this we turn and say to ourselves: "These catchwords are meaningless. They only add to the dead weight of labels by which several different forces are equated to one force in the mind's apprehension, and the whole issue obscured".

The only course, therefore, is to discover fundamental principles.

Our first question should be: What is history? Clearly, it employs scientific methods in collecting and weighing material, but it is no special science, and as now treated it is inadequate. Tacitus and Thucydides are frequently called artists. But this is a statement of a part, not the whole of their activity.

What does history deal with? The answer used to be: "With men and events". Nowadays we should have to state it thus: "History deals with individuals, events, and the masses, and it embraces the whole range of human activity". It has become obvious that the behaviour of the masses has some peculiar quality, as though the masses comprised a sort of entity which operated under government of natural mass-laws of its own. And to modern people who read the newspapers, mass-behaviour seems so mechanical, so entirely predictable, that hardly anyone would talk of history as being a biography of great men. Yet it would be too simple to equate the masses to some sort of crude machine level, for they have—excuse the *cliché*—"psychology". The mass psychology of various times, as revealed in countless apparently unimportant ways, should be almost as important to the historian as economics. The *tone* of many documents in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, for example, is as valuable as the actual content. And at the present date, as psychology proper is still only descriptive, it is safe to say that the mind best adapted to draw inferences from such data is the artist's. Therefore, we may say that the ideal historian of to-day would be integrated both as an artist and as a scientist. As such he will usurp the functions of neither. He will simply be an historian. At all events he ought to venture

out of the study into the open forum, for he uses words, and these do not make up any specialized scientific symbolism.

It is our axiom that history is a *melange* of determinism and accident, but a *melange* more or less logical. It follows, therefore, that the first task of the historian will be to distinguish, where possible, the fields in which accident enters and those which are determined. This determinism is not the transcendental determinism of the metaphysicians, in which Spengler seems to believe. Nothing more is meant than that determinism which issues from a limited causal system; and to define the limits of the system is also a function of the historian. Such a causal system, to use a covering term, is a state or civilization in which there has been interplay of physical phenomena and events with people who live, think and interact. Obviously, therefore, this determinism does not embrace all events which have existed in the physical world since creation. It embraces simply events which we can either know or infer, and so it should be possible to isolate the main determining factors; to isolate, again, what was subject to accident; hence to arrive at a logic of history which has a real meaning for our own age. Determinism, historically speaking, is seen to operate more decidedly in the behaviour of the mass than in that of the individual; and the larger the mass is, the more precisely is it determined as a mass.

But it would be ridiculous to believe, as Spengler seems to believe, that the individual is not subject to accident. It would be Herodotean to assume that the bullet which drew blood from Mussolini's nose was divinely guided away from his brain. The causal difference between the individual and the mass is simply conditioned by difference in their size. The lightning flash is likely to destroy the largest tree in the forest, but not the forest. The forest is too extensive to be affected appreciably by a lightning flash. Crassus, Pompey the Great, Cicero, Lepidus and Mark Antony died, but the *populus Romanus* evolved into an empire and became more or less static. Mirabeau, Jean Jacques, Desmoulins, Danton and Robespierre died, but in France a bourgeois state evolved out of feudalism. Trotsky would probably resent it if anyone called him, in the old-fashioned sense of the word, a maker of history. The mass is observed to evolve upwards or downwards; the individuals, the "great men", to appear in the crises, directing forces, explaining them and rendering them clear in the symbolisms of language and action. To the individual immersed in events it often seems that everything depends on the decision made at this or that moment. To the historian in his

study it just as frequently appears as if human decision mattered nothing and all was predetermined. So it is with Spengler. So much as this, however, is certain. The *time* at which an event takes place most certainly hinges on human decision; the *manner* in which the event takes place more or less hinges on human decision. But, notwithstanding, there are tides in the affairs of men that no individual can possibly stem. There are times when the process of events is seen, with pitiless clarity, to be issuing from formal causes far remote, when individuals are like flies on a torrent, when almost everyone seems to want something not to happen, and yet later ages, looking back, see that it had to happen. Such times are vital crises, like the collapse of the Roman Republic, like the downfall of the Roman Empire, like the 1790's. In fact, like events of our own day.

Such crises do not happen to young or primitive societies. It concerns us, in the twentieth century, to know what is underneath our times. Obviously a great social idea, at least in its application, is very nearly played out. To use two metaphors: Has a spring uncoiled to its fullest length, as was the case with the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century? Or is new wine likely to explode old bottles? In crises like these, however protracted and fluctuating they may be, is anyone seriously to look for a *deus ex machina* like the N.R.A.?

If we want to know what determined Roman civilization, to know, that is, its *significant* determiner, we ought to look for it in the formal cause of its peculiar quality. It had a peculiar quality. It differed absolutely from Alexander's empire, on the one hand, and from the empires of the Far East, on the other. I mean by "formal cause" the active, dynamic principle which actuated nearly all Romans in their daily life, which guided their approach to all their problems, which, in fact, made them the Romans they were. This principle was precisely what we call to-day private enterprise. As practised by the Romans, it can be equated to the following crude descriptive term: "How can I acquire the largest possible quantity of material goods and material power for myself; for myself, personally?"

This principle was so rooted that it was unconscious; yet from the late regal period to the collapse of the empire in the West it was ever-present. It is significant that in Rome, as in every state that operates on this principle, the education and early conditioning led most people to think that they were really acting for the welfare of the abstract idea contained in the word "state". *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. One might naturally object that

acquisitiveness is about as universal a characteristic as there is in the world. I think, however, that this objection would be superficial. A more universal characteristic still is the need for self-expression, and as the Romans expressed themselves nearly always pragmatically and materialistically, it is not too much to say that they had a genius for acquisition. The Far Easterners will haggle over a penny, but not many of them either make money or look forward to making it. In the classical world two great predecessors of Rome, Sparta and Athens, differed also from this principle. The Spartans really seem to have valued above everything else the self-esteem derived from their peculiar notion of honour. Most of the merchant class in Athens was composed of foreigners. Athens had an Imperialism, but it was an Imperialism exploited by the city operating as a single unit, not acquired through the mushroom growth of private enterprise and outspreading municipalities. And lack of property was no bar to public office in Athens. The native born Athenian would rather have enjoyed the reputation that a brilliant mind could bring him than all the wealth accumulated by the resident aliens of Piraeus.

The growth of an imperial power is a process, and in Rome, as in England, the nexus between legal and political history is very close. In an article of this nature it is impossible to do more than outline the evidence on which our general conclusions rest. I think, however, that the following tabulation is in the main accurate.

(1) *Patriarchal Rome, and the evolution into the Republic:*

In this early society there were two distinct classes, those that had property and those that did not have it. The former, the patron *gentes*, depended for the good things of life on the work of the latter, the *clientes*; or at least, on the exclusion of the *clientes* from most of the property. In this period the supreme power rested nominally with a king. The two events in patriarchal Rome most significant were the reforms of King Servius Tullius and the expulsion of King Tarquin the Proud. Our data for this period are very vague; but there seems little doubt that by the time of Servius Tullius the numbers of the *gentes* had become so thinned that they had to protect their power by making concessions. Tarquin the Proud was clearly an autocrat like the English King John, and the movement that deposed him was an oligarchic revolution of nobles. This is proved by the next constitution, for in framing it the nobles appealed to the constitution of Servius. This old constitution was based on property, and under it no

unpropertied man could hold office. Justice resided with the senate, and the senators were the property holders. Justice, therefore, was openly the interest of the possessing classes.

The death blow to feudalism was dealt in the middle or latter half of the 5th century, B.C., by the framing of the famous Twelve Tables, the first written laws of Rome. This act is a clear case of reform contrived by a ruling class to resist pressure from underneath; in Lenin's famous dictum, to resist the truly revolutionary pressure of a virile people. But while the nobles were still powerful enough to refuse complete political equality, they were compelled to grant personal equality in a law court to the poor against the rich. And the new code contained a principle which doomed the erstwhile feudal society. Whatever the *comitia* of the tribes (i.e., the populace) should determine was to have the force of law for all the citizens. This, more than anything else, proved the strength of the pressure from below. But the contention was for property, i.e., the lower classes wanted to possess what the upper classes possessed. *They did not stand for a different ethical ideal.* Therefore, it was at this time causally necessary that Rome should have (a) a great middle class—obviously, since the upper class was capable of absorbing the lower—and (b) a long period of class war, in which each individual of both parties was actuated by the same motive, namely, acquisition.

(2) *The Real Republic:*

From some time after the framing of the Twelve Tables up to the establishment of the empire by Augustus, Roman history can be written in terms of class struggle, Italian and foreign expansion, public and private aggrandisement; finally, in the great civil wars.

Underlying it all was the growth of two phenomena: the colonizing and municipal tendencies which created the real and essential machinery of active Imperialism.

The colonies were first founded by a sovereign act effected by a specific law. Originally they were military outposts located on the coast. In 183 B. C. three colonies were planted at inland sites. From fifty to sixty years later the Gracchi put them to their most significant use, which was to relieve the needy population, stimulate trade and promote rural prosperity.

The municipalities were more significant. Barbarians annihilate their enemies; conquerors like the generals of Alexander defeat them, take their lands and live among them as aristocrats. But the Romans incorporated many of them into municipalities, and as time went on, the municipalities gained greater rights and

distinctions until the original nature of them became almost forgotten. Here was the real mushroom growth. Municipal life, with its local magistrates, its small guilds and organizations fostering wealth accumulation, made possible the individual's material self-expression on a scale which no city-state or despotism could have provided. It was a tremendous potentiality and it grew slowly, organically and soundly, and because of it the Roman civilization lasted for centuries. In this municipal system of consolidation was the real distinction between Alexander's empire and Rome.

There was also, of course, the military expansion. Between 366 and 265 B. C., Rome became mistress of all Italy south of the Po. The conquest of Magna Graecia made her a Mediterranean power and brought her into the wars with Carthage. After Carthage was conquered, the provincial expansion beyond the seas began. And that this expansion was involuntary, in other words, that the potential energy of the expanding organism was such that Roman statesmen were almost afraid of it and only partially understood its meaning, is proved by the fact that it was intermittent and that the state, as a unit, sometimes refrained from taking what was in its power to take. Nearly always the military acquisitions were prompted by, and concomitant to, the expanding energies of the citizen body. *Rome never produced a conqueror like Alexander, Tambourlaine or Napoleon.* Julius Caesar used conquest to gain political power, not political power to gain conquest.

To the Roman citizen the provincial stood roughly as the proletariat stands to the capitalist to-day. Both are wealth-producers. Asia with its inherited wealth and enormous resources and indolent ways opened the eyes of the rich Romans. This province became the proconsul's plum job. But apart from the proconsul, the province suffered most acutely from the ravages of the *publicani*, the tax-farmers who contracted with the state to gather the revenues and were permitted pretty well to take all the provincials had, retaining for themselves the excess over and above the official payments to the capital. The provinces altered the nature of the class struggle at Rome. The lower classes wanted the political power which would make it easier for them to get out to the provinces and become rich and famous. The higher the Roman's rank, the greater his opportunity to do so. It was now still more apparent that the Roman masses neither had nor desired values different from those of their superiors. They wanted power and wealth, and Socratic questions of ethics were never raised by the so-called reformers. Gaius Gracchus, as a political measure, founded the first company of *publicani*. The greatest

of Roman reformers, in other words, devised the greatest instrument of bourgeois acquisitiveness Rome ever knew. The envy these publicans had for the aristocrats, and the hatred the aristocrats had for them, were founded on the fact that both classes wanted to possess the same thing. They did not stand for different aims.

The efficient causes of the great civil wars which immediately bred the empire were the great generals whose armies were necessary to protect or annex provinces. The formal cause of their strife was implicit in the organism of which they were a part. The generals were in political competition with each other. Instead of attacking each other through a stock exchange, they attacked more crudely—with the soldiers under their command. In the long struggle between Julius Caesar, Crassus and Pompey; in the later struggle between the triumvirs and Brutus and Cassius; at the beginning of the final struggle between Octavian and Antony, Liberalism had its protagonist in the famous orator Cicero. And the utter failure of this man, so preserved to us in his speeches and letters, illustrates with pitiless clarity the folly of trying to maintain a balance between forces whose specific nature it is to clash and destroy each other.

When Augustus, under a cloud of propaganda, established the empire, he altered no organic condition at all. He simply recognized, as Julius had recognized before him, conditions which had existed for nearly a century, and provided a constitution to fit them. Roman Imperialism, in high places, had also come down to a competition between individuals. As in an elimination tennis tournament only one man can win the first prize, so in such a society supreme power had ultimately to rest with one dictator. The conclusion was logical.

Empire, the achievement of it, is a confession that a limit has been reached. What did this *mean* to the individual Roman? The answer is clear and vitally important. It dominates the whole writing of Tacitus. It is reflected in the senatorial hatred of Tiberius and Domitian. In a word, it meant that the great career was gone. It took Romans almost a century of empire to realize this. But what was the main work of Augustus? He had made order out of chaos; he had relieved the provinces; he had created a salaried civil service; he had made the provinces prosperous and even happy, so that it was with real feeling that they worshipped him after his death as a god. But the decay in stock was already beginning in the capital. A new avenue for self-expression was needed and was not found. For several centuries Rome lived on

the energy of the provinces, where the same process that had happened to herself was underway in a new form. And for a century the civilization grew. It became a vast organism, complex, populous, cultured and safe, in which the provinces finally absorbed the capital. By the time of Trajan the world reached a high level of commerce which it never reached again until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Yet, in the fifth century, this organism decayed and fell, and the Dark Ages really descended and lasted for almost a thousand years.

Every organism implies death no less than life, and I do not think it a false analogy to use these words of empires. History should ask, not will it decay, but when will it decay, and for what specific reasons will it decay? And the majority of historians of Rome cite the effects as being causes. The reasons generally given are decline in stock, indifference of the senate and public to state affairs, *panem et circenses*, the rise of the pacific civilization of Christianity, bankruptcy in ideas and resources, diminishing trade returns and soil-exhaustion; chief of all, the strangling growth of the bureaucracy.

Is it necessary to say that these, most of them, were not causes but outward signs of an organic decay? They seem the invariable concomitants of this process which even in pristine times we saw in generation; which we saw set in active motion by the vigour, the pressure from below, of early Romans; which was strengthened by the inculcated reverence for the abstract tribal notion of patriotism, by physical hardihood and practical intelligence. It was given a physical direction by geography, a limitation by the relative absence of science, a mental direction by the empirical Roman mind, a necessity by what seems to be the human nature of Western man. Private enterprise is a fact which no Western thinker can dare blink. Its most direct result is to establish some form of a servile state.

Rome, as anyone would admit, suffered because she was a servile state. But it was just because she was a servile state that she became mighty. She had, in the two aspects of her administration, to face a dilemma, one horn menacing the republic, the other the empire. Without exploitation there could be no great career for the individual, and the republic demanded the career. Without curtailing exploitation and making a conservative system of it, there could be no state at all. Christianity, the Epicurean and Stoic philosophies, the Neo-Platonists, all seem to have been produced out of this waste land of hopelessness and disillusionment. The masses, even the upper classes, after two centuries of empire,

came to know bitterly that no matter how hard they laboured they could never fully realize their potentialities; that they were factual, if not legal, slaves. Having no hope in this world, it became comfortable to despise it and to concentrate on other-worldly religions. Yet, for some reason, Western man cannot take easily to mysticism. He must express himself outwardly. So when expansion ceased, decay set in.

This kind of servility is something which it is sentimental to deny or overlook. Aristotle justified slavery to the ancient world because it was necessary, and seemed to him a fact of nature. He observed that the motive force in a man was the realization of the self-entity. Therefore, the state would be a corporation of people who existed for this purpose. The Romans, not an *a priori* race, acquired property and imposed their wills on others, and in this way realized themselves. They neither wanted nor got the state of mind in which life is realized by a kind of contemplation of the divine. And although Aristotle, a fairly practical man, considered the contemplative life the highest end of man in this world, it is hardly necessary to state that such an end is impossible for Westerners as a race. Westerners neither understand nor wish to understand the Brahmans of the East.

Yet, Aristotle was near the root of the historic mystery. He saw that abilities differ, and that the superior man will not be able to realize himself to a complete degree unless he has leisure from supplying the needs of mere existence. Just in so far as he is superior, he is bound to requisition the services of the inferior man to do the menial work of the world. One sentence from the *Politics* is noteworthy: "If machines could operate automatically, as in the myths they say the tripods of Hephaestus did, if the shuttle could weave without a hand to guide it" . . . if this happened, then Plato's Republic might become possible. For Aristotle it was the *reductio ad absurdum*. For us it should be the most significant thing he ever said. Is it too much to say that Rome declined, when and how she did, because she had no machines and could not alter her values?

One thing historic study teaches is that, where there is an opening, the masses tend to gravitate towards it, and that so long as evolution is possible the mass-process will continue. Historic evolution can almost be gauged by the widening and narrowing in the range of choice of action and self-expression. And as it is obvious that machinery and science contain, for us, a vast reservoir, practically untapped and certainly not fully explored, the present situation seems explosive rather than apathetic. Those

whose meaning is identified with the old idea can hardly escape perishing when their meaning goes, but Spengler to-day seems to have been blinded by the worldweariness of the period as well as by his own *a priori* position. Roman history also shows that propaganda is no new thing, though the modern technique of lying and of using language to conceal thought has certainly reached a high peak of efficiency. But intelligent men deliberate only on what it lies in their power to effect. Those present-day Governments who, by "imposing ideas from above", would create conditions suitable for their own interests ought to learn from history that to do so is to prolong their time, not to consolidate it. It is impossible to resuscitate permanently any civilization without either altering the formal cause which has brought it into trouble or fundamentally altering the direction of its activity.

When a new era begins, the case might be different. At such a point of time, if ever, a man can resemble a god, for then he can lay causes. But whether it is possible for Western man to lay a different cause, or a cause operating in a different direction, from that which we have seen operating in Rome, cannot yet be told. To attempt to tell this would be to transcend the limits of our own age. Surely, however, we are justified in believing so much as this: though potential energies of our time are far greater than our time is using, nevertheless machines provide a means of decreasing the necessity of slavery in the world; and if the world has this recourse still untapped, it must ultimately use it. But as a corollary it must be added that unless state-education is altered and the values of the masses are profoundly altered, the new era will not escape the old vicious circle. So much, at any rate, seems the lesson of past history.