

Ideas in History

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IDEAS IN HISTORY ¹

RALPH H. GABRIEL

IN the early 1930's I teamed up with Professor Stanley Williams of the Yale Department of English to give a course in American thought. He provided lectures on certain literary figures. I had the larger part of the course. After three years of very happy association, Williams was compelled for lack of time, to abandon the partnership. Save for the unfinished work of Parrington, American thought at the time was virtually an unplowed field. When Williams and I began, there were no other courses in the country of a similar nature. Merle Curti, however, soon began giving one at Smith.

At the beginning I tried to work out the subject matter in terms of those things in which students are interested. Obviously this course, as all others, should be directed to young men living in what was for them a very real present. The materials of history, then, must be made relevant to and useful in an on-going present. I was familiar with the problems of teaching political history. The political historian, it seemed to me, labors under a very real handicap. It is true that political battles, such as a presidential election or the effort to establish a needed reform, are often vastly absorbing to the people participating in or observing them. But when the excitement of the contest has subsided and the battle is won or lost, the affair soon falls into the category of interest of last year's football game or, perhaps, even the one of ten years ago. The old fire and the old excitement can only be recovered by artistic recreation. Of all the various specialities within the historical guild that of the political historian seems to me to require the greatest skill as an artist.

¹This paper was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the History of Education Section of the National Society of College Teachers of Education, Atlantic City, February 26, 1951.

I set myself what I thought would be an easier task. I decided to deal with ideas, and questions that provide the materials for those midnight sessions that undergraduates call bull sessions. Such questions occur to all of us for they interest older men as well as younger men. Here are some examples of what I had in mind. If there are so many uneducated people and so many dumb people in the country, is it not dangerous, even silly, to let every one have the vote? If most people are looking out primarily for number one, is not intelligent selfishness the proper way to get on in the world? Is not selfishness the primary motivation of nations in the world of international society? If it is, why should anyone be stupid enough to think that he is being idealistic if he volunteers for the armed forces? And beyond politics lies religion. Has not science made religion outmoded? These and a thousand other questions are bandied back and forth.

For my own purpose I oversimplified in classifying these questions. There are, it seems to me, two big categories into which they fall. Every man must ask himself: what is my relation to the enveloping universe and what is my relation to the society of which I am a part? (I am sure the trained philosopher would note the hand of the amateur in the formulation of these questions.) The first question leads out into both religious and scientific cosmologies. The second leads into social theories, ideas, knowledge, and beliefs. It is, of course, obvious that in any particular age the answers to one question are closely related to the answers of the other. For example, the religious concept of a kingdom of God could hardly grow up in any but a monarchical age. Monarchy is a political arrangement. I set about trying to group material about these two questions. I emphasized scientific, religious, and social thought, using the latter in its broadest sense. I planned to present the material in a general way in the form of discussion—now presenting the point of view of religion, now of science, using the same method with other issues.

At this point it would seem pertinent to ask: why a history course? Why not a course in the current discussion of the problems mentioned? There is certainly plenty of material. The only answer, aside from the fact that I was being paid to be an historian, is the historian's faith. Over the entrance to the library of the University of Colorado stands an inscription that runs substantially as follows. "He who never escapes from the present remains always a child." Is this affirmation true? It is doubted or ignored by many to-day. In facing my problem of dealing with the two basic questions chosen as the fundamental theme for the

course, I recalled, as every historian must, that men in every age since the beginning of reflective thought have asked these same questions. They are what Crane Brinton has called the "Big Questions." The knowledge that men in other times have asked these questions does at least three things. It tends to dispel the arrogant conceit that our generation, first among men, has come up against tough problems. It tends to dispel the equally arrogant idea that the specific formulae that our generation achieves can be thought of as the final answers. Such an attitude is the breeding ground for fanaticism and intolerance, the two great enemies of the inquiring mind. Finally, knowledge of the answers proposed by other generations offer suggestions for our own answers. More important, the answers of the past to the "Big Questions" make up, when taken together, the tradition into which we are born, the tradition that conditions our life and our thought. It seemed to me, as an historian, that the proper way to deal with tradition is to trace its unfolding from the point of view that, as we in our day, are helping to shape the tradition that will condition the lives of those who follow us, so our forefathers have in the same way made their impress on our lives. If we understand that we cannot escape being affected by answers to the "Big Questions," perhaps we shall be able to appraise these answers better if we try to see the men who have gone before us struggling in their own time and setting out to achieve their answers.

The discussion has brought us to the central theme of the historian. He deals primarily with social change: the appearance and disappearance of individual men; the emergence, the growth, and, perhaps the demise of nations; the rise of new doctrines concerning God, man, and society, their periods of triumphant acceptance, their decline and sometimes ultimate rejection, and then perhaps their reappearance tricked out in the habilaments appropriate to a later age. One thinks of Thomas Hobbes who to the men of the eighteenth century seemed safely buried in the graveyard of deceased ideas but who rose to walk again, carrying a heavy club, in the Nazi philosophy of Hitler's Germany. The historian cannot be content merely to describe change; the compulsions of that intellectual curiosity which is the driving force behind all scholarship require him to seek to disentangle, so far as he is able, the factors that bring it about.

Since I have been asked to make what might be called a testimonial at an old time experience meeting, I venture to set forth some of the factors that seem to me to be of primary importance in historical change, particularly as they apply in the course under discussion. That course

deals with the history of ideas in America. Of necessity the very proposal of such an attempt to trace the history of ideas raises the question as to what is the importance of ideas. In my graduate school days, when I was still strongly under the influence of a deterministic sociology, I once had the bad taste to suggest to one of my fellow students whose Ph.D. thesis dealt with an aspect of the history of political theory that he was in reality writing a history of hot air. I have lived to regret this disclosure of my inadequacy. For John Dewey the idea is the instrument of man's creative activity. It precedes the event. Verifying illustrations of this contention can be selected from many aspects of man's activity. In technological advance the principle is especially evident. But ideas also grow out of social scenes and they do so because they have utility in the particular situation from which they emerge. In the days before the Civil War the planter aristocracy in the South was criticized, even vilified, by earnest anti-slavery men in the North on the ground that the planter sullied the fair name of American democracy by holding human beings in bondage and by living on the profits of their enforced labor. The planters answered by the development of a pattern of ideas that included a code of chivalry which romantically pictured the planter aristocrats as the nineteenth century counterpart of the knights of old and which, at the same time, set up for democracy in the South the ideal of Greek democracy, which, it will be recalled, rested on the institution of slavery. The pattern had utility and lasted so long as it continued to have utility, in providing a sense of intellectual security. In this case the idea followed the event, for the plantation system was established in America long before this particular pattern of ideas was developed for its defense. Taking the over-all view, I have, however, a fundamental skepticism as to the historian's ability to separate wholly cause and effect in the relation of the idea to the event. The two are intimately interrelated and neither can be understood without the other. So I felt that a course in American thought must deal with social backgrounds as well as with specific ideas.

What, then, are the factors that may be considered primarily in social change? They are the factors that bring changes in ideas and in social scenes. Many years ago the pioneer American anthropologist, Lewis Henry Morgan, looking back over the whole span of man's earthly career, insisted that technological advance is the spearhead of progress or what we would somewhat more cautiously today call change. New inventions force changes in society; note the automobile. No better illustration of his point could be found than in the history of our own

country. It was the peculiar fate, or fortune, of America to be founded in the seventeenth century which saw the climax of the scientific revolution. Perhaps the most important difference between American life in 1651 and 1951 lies in the differences in the technological equipment of the people living in these two years. But behind the change in technology has been the accelerating accumulation of scientific knowledge, making technological advance possible. By the middle of the nineteenth century the scientific method had been turned into an instrument for systematic and continuous invention. Technology is one of the principal factors in the amazing rise of the United States as a nation in a little more than a century and a half from its feeble beginnings in 1776, to its present power position. Since technology rests ultimately on knowledge, it may fairly be said that the acquisition of new knowledge, not only as it relates to technology, but the whole range of useful knowledge is the spearhead of social change. But it is necessary to remember that new knowledge always appears in an established social scene, a scene that reflects, because it has been conditioned by, tradition. Speaking roughly and quite abstractly, then, a specific social change is the resultant of the interplay and the final equilibrium achieved between the drive toward novelty exerted by the new knowledge and the drive to hold fast to the old and familiar exerted by tradition.

There are other factors than knowledge that tend to effect or to reinforce social change. Conflicts between nations tend to reinforce both the power of tradition and the drive toward novelty for the nation at war tends to hold fast to the tried good while often being forced by the exigencies of crisis to undertake the new. But beyond such effects victory or defeat in war makes their own impress on the ideas of the nations involved, the victor confirmed by success in the soundness of his ways and the defeated, as Germany after World War I, shaken and seeking new arrangements. But beyond such effects the defeated nation may find the victor using the instrument of military government to extirpate certain patterns of thought formerly current among the conquered population. The attempted de-Nazification of Germany after World War II is a case in point. War cannot be ignored as a factor in explaining change in ideas and social scenes.

Religion is another factor. Religion in its early, dynamic sect state frequently becomes an innovator as in the case of the seventeenth century Quakers. When the sect stage passes and religion takes on the characteristics of an organized church, it frequently becomes the sanctifier of tradition. In nineteenth century America, religion in the South

defended slavery by reference to Biblical authority and in the North defended the current capitalism by similar dependence upon the Scriptures. But the Mormon creation in the Utah desert of its variant ecclesiastical, social, and economic order suggests the social dynamism that can exist in sect religion.

One more thing needs to be said about ideas. We can conceive of knowledge—scientific knowledge—as an accumulating body of understandings. Likewise we can conceive of beliefs—religious or social beliefs, theories, and speculations including the whole range of philosophical systems—as an accumulating body of ideas. In changing social scenes men may dip into this body of theories and beliefs to pull up old ideas that have fallen into disuse or even been abandoned and set them again to useful work in a particular present. So the Nazis resurrected Hobbes and so the Southern planters recovered, by way of Sir Walter Scott, mediaeval chivalry. On the other hand new knowledge creating new social situations may compel the creation of genuinely new ideas, at least in the social devices for solving particular problems. It seemed to me necessary to remind students of the present generation of these varying phenomena in the history of ideas.

We live in an age in which ideas are more and more used as weapons. The present generation, more than its predecessors, requires an understanding of the role played by ideas in a culture. Skill in the use of ideas has become increasingly important in the middle of the twentieth century because of the tactics of our Russian adversaries in the use of ideas as weapons. They have developed the tactic of inversion in the meaning of familiar words. George Orwell in his able novel, *1984*, made this tactic of inversion one of his central themes in his description of life under an authoritarian regime. Three slogans everywhere and at all times assailed the ears and eyes of the inhabitants of Oceania: “war is peace;” “ignorance is strength;” and “slavery is freedom.” We recall the standard Soviet inversion: despotism is democracy.” When North Koreans crossed the 38th parallel in June 1950, aggression became defense. The present effort of the USSR to confuse thought by the inversion of the meaning of words seeks to prevent rational discussion through the fatal impairment of the means of communication. In our day only an intellect trained in the history and use of ideas can deal effectively with this tactic of confusion.

Considerations such as those just discussed led me to a re-appraisal of the two basic questions used in the 1930s for the organization of the materials of the course: namely the relation of the individual to the

universe on the one hand and to society on the other. These ideas came to seem useful only for the more elementary organization of material. In their place has emerged a formulation that I, personally, find useful though others may discover little value in it. It grew out of an effort to separate ideas from social scenes and yet, at the same time, to relate the two.

Ideas are part of that larger complex that anthropologists call culture. For some years historians have been using the concept of culture as an approach to their work. For the purpose of dealing with ideas I have fallen into the habit of thinking of culture as a square—a square platform resting on nature created by man to enable him to satisfy more effectively the needs and urges of his life. The metaphor is intended merely to make the concept usable for particular tasks.

One corner of the platform is supported by language, or rather the entire apparatus of communication including the symbol system used by the people who live in the culture. Without organized language culture could not exist; man's achievement in the development of organized language is the reason why he emerged as the only culture-bearing animal. "Every language," remarked Benjamin Lee Whorf in 1941 in a paper on the Hopi language, "binds the thought of its speakers by the involuntary patterns of its grammar. The grammar of our mother tongue determines not only the way we build sentences but also the way we view nature and break up the kaleidoscope of experience into objects and entities about which to make sentences. We cut up and organize the spread and flow of events as we do largely because, through our mother tongue, we are party to an agreement to do so, not because nature itself is segmented in exactly that way. Languages differ not only in how they build their sentences but in how they break down nature into elements to put into these sentences."² The nature of language, then, affords an insight into the mental processes of a particular people that can be obtained in no other way. As a consequence it has seemed necessary to me, in dealing with the development of American thought, to take account of the evolution of American-English. The importance of American symbols and of modern mass communications needs no comment.

Beneath the second corner of the platform stands a particular body of knowledge. Every culture rests on a body of knowledge. In less developed cultures most of this knowledge is folk knowledge—mainly those necessary understandings that make possible the survival of the

² Laura Thompson, *Culture in Crisis, A Study of the Hopi Indians*. p. 153. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950.

tribe in its particular habitat. In developed cultures, such as our own, folk knowledge gained from experience with life still bulks very large. Beside it, however, is that knowledge gained by scholarship and science. In addition to the knowledge of pure science, moreover, is that understanding of how to translate it into useful processes and practical machines that has come to be called in American-English "know-how." It has been the vast increase in this body of knowledge and "know-how" that has brought such changes in American culture since the seventeenth century.

The third corner of the platform rests on a broad column of intertwined institutions—economic, political, military, educational, religious, to mention only the more obvious and important. This aspect of culture is the primary interest of the economist, the sociologist, the political scientist, and the institutional historian. For the historian of ideas this complex of institutions is the dynamic matrix that, at times, throws up new ideas but that usually attracts to itself ideas selected from the great body of accumulated thought that is the heritage of civilized man.

Finally the fourth corner of the platform rests on two columns which for want of better terminology, I call belief and opinion. Belief includes not only the whole range of religion but beliefs about the nature of man and social beliefs, such as the value of democracy or of communism. Opinion includes the harvest of speculation—metaphysics, political theory, educational theory, to mention only a few—which results from rational thinking. In the unfolding of American culture the Christian tradition has provided the chief body of religious beliefs; and John Locke, followed by Rousseau, has contributed basic political theory. This corner of the platform is the particular field of the historian of ideas. It is here that the value system of a culture may be found—the definitions of the good life that the people who carry the culture accept.

I have not mentioned material culture, the aspect of culture that is so conspicuous and important in the modern age. Material artifacts are associated, as instruments, with the cultural divisions represented by each corner of the platform. What of art? Art is a diverse and far-ranging expression of the creativeness of the human spirit. Art is a response to one of the most primitive urges within man, the appreciation of the beautiful and the desire to create and to possess it. It is found in the most primitive as well as the most advanced cultures. Like material artifacts art is also associated with all four corners of the platform. It is a means of communication not only of ideas but of feelings. It reflects the body of knowledge on which the culture rests and is itself

based on a body of technical knowledge. It affects the artifacts and rituals associated with the complex of institutions and calls forth its own institutions. And frequently it provides the supreme expression of the beliefs, the aspirations, and the values of the culture.

The concept of culture outlined above provides perspective on change, that central aspect of the historical process. Several considerations require emphasis. The various aspects of culture, the four corners of the platform, are so intimately related that important change in one area affects, sooner or later, all other areas. Language provides one of the best examples. Modifications at any corner of the square are almost always reflected in changes in vocabulary. Such mid-twentieth century words as ideology, sulphanylamide, and brain trust are shorthand representations for significant cultural developments in three different corners of the square. Because a functioning culture is so closely knit an entity a phenomenon appears that Albert Galloway Keller has called the "strain toward consistency." A culture tends to resist inclusion, particularly if they are to be borrowed from outside, of traits that would provide discordant elements. Yet the harmonies toward which the "strain toward consistency" seems to make are rarely, if ever, fully achieved. In the United States the forces tending toward standardization have not obliterated regional variations in our culture though they have reduced these divergencies materially. The most striking disharmony is, of course, to be found in the limitations established in social behaviour in the application of the over-riding democratic ideal to persons of color. Americans have learned to live (albeit uncomfortably) with this disharmony. The discomfort comes from the operation of the principle of the strain toward consistency, which has in our history operated to raise the status of the Negro from chattel slave to that of freeman and which now is a force making for the full extension of democracy to the colored race.

The historian of ideas must take account of all these factors—the strain toward consistency; individual, group, and regional variations, and disharmonies. He must deal with these not only as they arise in the culture, when considered as a whole, but when they appear in his own field of interest, namely knowledge and belief and opinion. The tensions and even open conflicts between science and theology are familiar examples of disharmonies operating in the realm of ideas; and the theological formulations of Protestant "modernism" at the turn of the twentieth century suggest the effect of the principle of the strain toward consistency.

The metaphor of the square platform has significance only as a tool aiding in the classification of diverse cultural materials and reminding the student of areas that he must not overlook. It provides, after all, merely a more elaborate way of asking the basic questions stated at the beginning of this discussion. I come back to the fact that every man by virtue of the fact that he is alive and endowed with reason must ask himself: what is my relation to the cosmos; and what is it to the society of men on our planet? With the answers to these questions thought begins.