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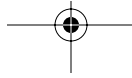
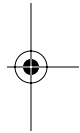
History and Social Change: Some Myths and Realities

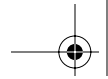
GUY ROCHER, 1976

PART ONE

I am a sociologist who has spent a large proportion of his life studying and writing on the evolution of Quebec within the Canadian and North American context. In various ways, Quebec has been my laboratory because I have been sometimes puzzled, at other times optimistic, and at some other times disturbed and concerned by what was going on both within that society and within its relationships with its broader environment. Moreover, it has happened at some points in time that I have been both an actor in the change that was taking place and an observer of that change. For instance, as a member of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education, the so-called Parent Commission, I tried to understand the main trends of the evolution of the Quebec educational system in the past, the role it played in the history of French Canada, the factors that both shaped it in the past and impeded its evolution at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time, my colleague-commissioners and I were looking into the future in order to propose the outlines of a new educational system that would be more in line with the type of society that we can imagine and hope for in the future. To me, this experience was both applied sociology and policy making, one feeding the other and calling for the other.

Therefore, with this experience as a background, I thought at first that I should take this opportunity to explain once again the recent evolution of Quebec and discuss some of the issues raised by its future. But after working at this task for a while, I developed a strong reaction against what I was doing. Several times



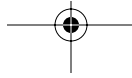
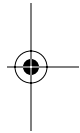


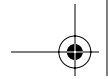
in the past, I have complained about the fact that we, Quebec sociologists, were generally bound to speak only about Quebec when we were invited to the other Canadian provinces, to the United States, and to Europe. Never or almost never were we invited to deal with any other, broader topic, and never were we invited as plain sociologists. It seemed that we were labelled forever as Quebec sociologists. I remember, for instance, a couple of years ago, attending a seminar with a dozen Quebec sociologists at one of the Ontario universities, where our colleagues had organized a one-term-long seminar on Quebec society. And we finally reacted very negatively and overtly against the fact that we were always invited to talk only about Quebec, and never as sociologists who were also interested in other topics of a more general nature.

But this time, the choice of the topic was left entirely to me. Yet I was again reacting as a Quebec sociologist. Hence, when for the first time as far as I could remember, I was invited without any specification as to the subject that I was expected to deal with, I found myself falling back on the traditional topic of the Quebec sociologist. This time, I could not blame anybody but myself for not taking this opportunity to feel free to present the subject of my choice. This, by the way, is a good illustration of how sociologists belong to the society that they study, and how they are themselves submitted to the expectations of others or to the expectations that they think others have, expectations that create what we call the social control and the cultural patterns of the society.

Now, instead of coping once again with the evolving situation in Quebec, which, I don't deny, might be interesting, I thought that I should engage in what might be for me a new venture, consisting paradoxically of presenting a topic that is of immediate interest to me.

But, as will be seen, the reflections of a sociologist, even when he wants them to be as general as possible, are never completely disconnected from the actual society he is living in. As a matter of fact, if I have been concerned over the past years with the meaning of history, this interest sprang directly from the experience I had of a society like Quebec's, which was evolving very rapidly. Events like the so-called Quiet Revolution in Quebec, the protest movements of various sorts among the youth in North America and Europe during the 1960s, the growing number of independent nations, the impact of socialism as well as of nationalism in the modern world, the constant threat of the atomic destruction of millions of people, the expanding areas of influence of the socialist ideologies: All of this has served as a background to the questions that have progressively become the main concerns on my mind. The questions all those events, and many others, raise, it seems to me, can be put in the following words: Are we sure that the history of humankind has some meaning? How can we be sure, first, that it has a meaning and, second, that it has the meanings that we say or that we think it has?



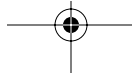


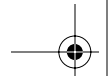
These are questions that philosophy more than sociology has dealt with in the past. But the more I come to know sociology, the more I must admit that it has been deeply influenced by the philosophers, particularly the philosophers of history, who have been wrestling with those questions. Names like Auguste Comte, Hegel, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, Spengler, and Sorokin are regarded by us as the forefathers of our discipline.

I think it is extremely difficult for a person, both as an individual and as a member of a collectivity, to think of history as being meaningless and without any goal. If I can use here the word “archetype” in the sense that Carl Jung gave to that word, which refers to a representation that goes back to a remote past and is very largely shared among humankind to the point that it now seems to be inherited, I think we can say that this idea of the meaningfulness of human history is one of the great archetypes that is to be found in all societies and at all periods of history. Indeed, the roots of this archetype are not necessarily the same in all societies, probably because we cannot go back far enough in the past to uncover the common roots of this widely spread archetype. Each civilization has a specific history of the meaning of its own history and/or of the history of humankind. Here I will trace what I think to be the main historical roots of that archetype in the Western world. I will more specifically identify three great currents of thought that have fed this archetype: they are the Judeo-Christian religions, scientific positivism, and the socialist ideologies. Let me now expand on each of them.

The Christian religions, whether they are Catholicism or Protestantism or Oriental Christianity, have all inherited from the Jewish religion a profound conviction that the history of humankind has its meaning in its relationship with either the will of God or the kingdom of God, of which it is a part and in which it finds its purpose and its end. Before Christ, the most meaningful events taking place, from that perspective, were the difficult and uneasy relationships between God and his chosen people: the people of Israel. Obviously, at the time they took place, those relationships between God and this not very numerous and hardly known people were kept unknown to the very large majority of the men and women who lived outside of Israel at that time, and they had no historical importance and no historical significance at all in the sense that they had no practical immediate impact on the great historical events of that time. The evolution of great civilizations of that period, in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Roman Empire, was untouched by the history of the relationships between Israel and God. Yet, in spite of that, the Christian tradition has magnified those relationships to the point of making them the centre of the history of the world at that time and up to now.

On the foundations of this heritage from the religion of Israel, all the Christian religions have evolved their own eschatology and their own teleology – that is,

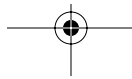
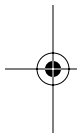


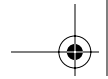


they all have developed a more or less explicit scheme or explanation or interpretation of past history, ancient and recent, and they all have an explicit or implicit representation of where the world is going and/or should go and why. In the Christian tradition, the visible history of humankind is regarded as one aspect or one dimension of the history of the kingdom of God, the latter being partly visible and partly invisible, partly historical and partly over and above history. Through their actions and deeds, consciously or unconsciously, human beings have engaged in the necessary evolution of the kingdom of God, so that one's own personal life has a meaning both in itself and through the meaning that the history of the city of God gives to the history of the city of humankind.

Obviously, within the Christian tradition, the meaning of individual and collective history has given rise to a great variety of interpretations and has been implemented in a great variety of types of behaviours. More than anyone else maybe, Max Weber has demonstrated the different economic behaviours that spring from the different conceptions of "the calling" and of the evolution of the kingdom of God in its relation with human history to be found among three branches of the Christian tradition of modern times: the Puritan, the Lutheran, and the Catholic. Max Weber has especially emphasized how, among the Puritans, the doctrine of predestination, the notion of a calling in this world, and the link that was made between success in this world and salvation in the eternal life contributed to developing an economic behaviour and motivation that served to pave the way to modern capitalism. The Weberian interpretation of this historical role of the Puritan ethic, the meaning it gave to the lives of many men and women, individually and collectively, is far from foreign to North American history, Canadian as well as American, past and still recent. Although Max Weber's thesis has been challenged in many ways and has been one of the most discussed hypotheses in the social sciences, it remains on the whole one of the most enlightening contributions of the social scientists to the understanding of our contemporary history.

In Quebec some historians and social scientists have shed some light on one current of thought within the Roman Catholic Church that has been quite deeply influential on the image that the French Canadians have developed of themselves, of their historical calling in North America, and that has served to justify their status and their peculiar position on the North American continent. This current of thought was rooted in a relatively long tradition that all the historians and social scientists who have dealt with it have not totally seen. This tradition can be called the non-Jansenist, rigoristic branch of the French Roman Catholic Church, which in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries developed against both the Gallican anti-Papist and anti-Roman ideology that was predominant at the Court of Versailles, especially under Louis XIV and Colbert, and against



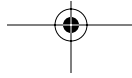


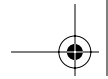
Jansenism, which was mostly centralized at Port-Royal and which represented for awhile a kind of official opposition to the court. The non-Jansenist rigorism had much in common with Jansenism, so that it has often been confused with it. But one of the main differences with Jansenism was the strong Papist component that was not to be found in Jansenism. Moreover, the non-Jansenist tradition was somewhat a secret society that was identified under the name of La Société du Saint-Sacrement de l'Autel.

It is this non-Jansenist rigorism, strongly Papist and much more otherworldly oriented than Puritan Protestantism, that was highly influential in the Roman Catholic Church in the first period of the French colony of New France. Bishop Laval, the first bishop of Quebec, who largely contributed to shaping the Church of New France, was one of the representatives of this current of thought in New France.

In New France the Catholics belonging to that tradition were characterized by very rigoristic morals, including a strong opposition to the use of alcohol in the fur trade with the Aborigines; they were very strongly in favour of the settlement of both the French and Aborigines on farms, where they would all lead a good, Christian, regular life, instead of travelling across the continent and living in the woods without enough control and out of sight of the religious authorities.

For several reasons, this religious rigorism came to a clash with the Gallican ideology that was progressively taking root in New France, especially at the end of the seventeenth century. And it was the latter, the Gallican ideology, that finally became the dominant, official position of both the church and the state in New France by the end of the French regime. Yet the non-Jansenist, rigoristic tradition always remained in the background, mostly among some groups of the clergy, and it inspired what might be called the rightist wing of the Roman Catholic Church throughout the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. By the second half of the nineteenth century, it was this rightist wing of the Roman Catholic Church that had become dominant in Quebec, although it was still at times strongly opposed by the liberals of that period, who were largely inspired by the anticlerical and more or less openly atheist French intellectuals. But the rightist wing triumphed over its opponents by the middle of the nineteenth century. It was therefore the rigoristic, Catholic tradition that inspired the clerical domination of the Roman Catholic Church in French Canada, starting with the second half of the nineteenth century and lasting about one century – that is, until the second half of the twentieth century. And one aspect of this domination of the Roman Catholic Church was the so-called ruralist image of the calling of French Canada that became predominant by the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth – that is, during the period of the industrial revolution in Quebec. As we know well, the industrial revolution in Quebec was



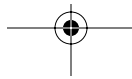
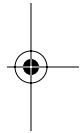


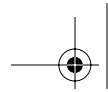
not initiated by the French Canadians. They were not at all instrumental in that revolution, which was effected largely through British, and later English Canadian, and finally American capital and technicians, while the French Canadians were providing mostly the labour force – and still more a cheap labour force. It was to justify this situation that the idea was developed that urban and industrial life was identified somehow with materialism, which was itself related to Protestantism. The Catholics, for their part, were said to be inspired by a more spiritual view of life and were consequently to stay out of the big cities and the manufactures and to keep on with the traditional way of life that had evolved on the farms and in the rural parish. The latter became the ideal model of French Canadian, Catholic individuals and their collectivity.

Thus some sort of a philosophy or a theology of history applied to the French Canadians was made explicit by some theologians at the beginning of the twentieth century. And this theology of history had a long-standing influence on the economic and political attitudes of the French Canadians up to the 1950s or the 1960s, and it is probably still influential in some quarters of the French Canadian population.

These are just a few illustrations of the impact of the theological representation of history and of the theological interpretation of the evolution of humankind and of specific societies or groups within society. This is history as seen *sub specie aeternitatis* – that is, as it is supposed to be seen from God's viewpoint. Starting with the Jewish tradition, as I noted earlier, there is a long unbroken tradition of such a representation, which goes through the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, and up to our times. Bishop Bossuet, the great writer of the French classical period, who was also the prestigious preacher at the French Court in the seventeenth century, has probably made more explicit than anyone else this representation of history as the implementation of God's will.

While the theological interpretation of history has a long tradition that goes back several thousand years, the positivist, or scientific, tradition is much shorter. Or, at least, this is how it appears to us because in the Western world we still believe that the beginning of science goes back only as far as the fifteenth or sixteenth century, or even the seventeenth century, with the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the so-called Renaissance. In fact, it is certain that scientific knowledge was already of prime importance among the Greek philosophers some 2,200 years ago and that it might have been quite lively in at least some periods of the Egyptian civilization. But it happens that throughout history the scientific tradition has been more broken, less continuous, and less ubiquitous than the theological and religious one. There have been periods in the history of the Western world – for instance, part of the Middle Ages, especially the low

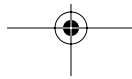
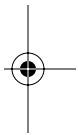


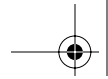


Middle Ages, from about the sixth or seventh century to the eleventh century – when scientific knowledge almost disappeared or at least was kept in the background and could not be practiced in the open. In those conditions, scientific knowledge was not predominant enough to have some impact on the vision of history that people of those centuries had.

Starting with the sixteenth century, the role and importance of scientific knowledge came into the open, although it was not thoroughly accepted by the dominating intelligentsia of that time. But thanks to the methodology that could be developed and to the increasing success of research in the natural sciences, and also to the industrial use that could be made of some knowledge, science came to be regarded as one of the great achievements of modern humans and more and more as the main source of inspiration for the understanding of the world – at least of the physical world, the world of the natural order. Starting with the Renaissance, science had finally come to be more or less accepted as long as it was dealing only with the natural order, leaving the soul and the life of human beings and their society outside of its realm – that is, in the universe of the higher realities, which have lives either by themselves or through the grace of God and which should never be confused with the natural order. It was clearly understood that the scientific laws could apply to the natural order, where the hard rule of necessity and determinism was the only one that existed. But human beings, it was thought, had inherited either from God, or from the development of their intelligence, or from both, a freedom and a higher destiny that was supposed to put them aside, making them an intermediate being between animals and angels, the king of the creation, the masterpiece of God's creation in this world.

It was a great shock when it first came to be said in the Christian world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that humans were not that superior being that they had been thought to be and that their nature and fate needed to be reconsidered in the light of science and scientific knowledge, without any theological or metaphysical postulate about their superiority. I personally think that this new statement of humankind took place mainly on three occasions of great significance. One was the publication in France of the so-called *Encyclopédie*, which gave rise to the movement of the *encyclopédistes*, the philosophers of the new materialistic approach to the nature and meaning of humankind and, as a consequence, to the meaning of its history. Indeed, the *encyclopédistes* were regarded as the worst threat to religion (the Catholic Church) and to the theology of history that was then still dominant. It was under D'Alembert and Diderot that this vast undertaking took place, which comprised thirty-three volumes that were supposed to be the sum of all the progress that scientific knowledge had made at that time in all the disciplines. People like Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and many others were associated with that publication as both contributors and supporters. But summing up the scientific knowledge of the time was really only

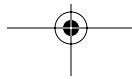


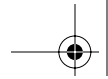


one aspect of the *Encyclopédie*, the other being the presentation of a vision of the world that was broad enough to take the place of the out-dated religious perspective. It is in this sense that the *Encyclopédie* gave rise to a school of thought, that of the *encyclopédistes*, who were proposing a new vision of humankind and a reinterpretation of its history.

The *Encyclopédie* was published between 1751 and 1766. Some seventy-five years later, a second great event took place in the intellectual life of the Western world, with the publication of Auguste Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–1842). It was an important event because this philosopher gave a clear formulation to the new philosophy of history that had been kept mostly latent, although clear enough, in the *Encyclopédie*. Auguste Comte stated his famous “Law of the Three States,” according to which the history of knowledge in each discipline was clearly divided into three stages: the theological one, where the foundations of all explanation were to be found in the role and action of gods or spirits or some sort of supernatural beings or forces; the metaphysical stage, a transitory one during which the explanation by supernatural agents was replaced by the recourse to abstractions, ideas, intellectual constructions that were a product of the imagination of the philosophers; and, finally, the positivist stage, where the explanation is looked for by observing the reality as it is, using an adequate methodology, in order to uncover the natural laws that may provide the only true explanation. According to Auguste Comte, all sciences have successively been through these three stages but not necessarily at the same time and at the same tempo. Now, he stated, the time had come for the sciences of humankind to achieve at last their positivist stage; after all, the natural sciences had done so. That is how Auguste Comte finally became the founder of sociology: He coined the word for that new science of humankind, first calling it social physics, the purpose of which was to lay down the foundations of a positivist – that is, a scientific – knowledge of humankind, of its history. Auguste Comte was convinced that the real root of all social problems was ignorance of the scientific laws that govern human society and its history. Just as humankind had gained control of nature when it finally discovered the natural laws, humans would also be able to control their own society and their own history as soon as they became aware of the social laws. Thus Auguste Comte was the founder not only of sociology, but also of what he called a new ethics, which was essentially based on the scientific knowledge of human reality, of its limitations, imperatives, and possibilities. Auguste Comte was therefore the most explicit philosopher of the scientific interpretation of the history of humankind, even though he was neither the only one nor the first one.

But Auguste Comte was probably still more important in that he paved the way to the third event that was to take place in the second half of the nineteenth century, which was the development of evolutionism. At first, evolutionism was

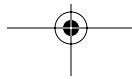


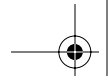


not a philosophy but a series of scientific discoveries on the history of living species and on the transmission of acquired biological characteristics. The Austrian botanist Mendel, whose writings were discovered long after he died, the French zoologist Lamarck, and the English biologist Darwin, the latter being probably the best known now, are the three names to be mentioned here of scientists who discovered the main laws of the evolution of living organisms, which provided the key to the history of life over millions and millions of years. Now, for the first time in the Christian civilization, the natural world did not appear as the outcome of a creation that had taken place according to the word of the Bible, but as the outcome of a long evolution that was not made up of mere accidents but that followed specific laws that could now be clearly stated.

It is significant that those men of science did not themselves extend their conclusions to include the realm of human beings. They had been dealing with flowers and plants and animals. But the conclusion was rapidly reached by some other thinkers that humans could not be kept outside that evolution. This was a very important step. Four hundred years before that, Copernicus and Galileo had clearly established that the sun was not revolving around the earth but that the earth was part of the solar system. As we have all learned, Copernicus and Galileo were thus making a drastic change not only in our knowledge of this world, but maybe still more in the image that practically all the preceding generations had had about humankind, its place in the universe, its destiny in this world. It is precisely because Galileo was regarded as a threat to the dominant theological ideology of his time that he was condemned not to publish his discoveries. It was an intellectual and spiritual revolution of the same size that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century with evolutionism. Now, for the first time, it clearly appeared that the evolution of the natural order had not been revolving around the appearance of humans in this world as superior beings of some other nature. Humans were part and members of the natural order; they were one species among the animals, with whom they were related by a common history, and the same rules or laws of evolution applied to them as well.

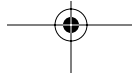
And not only did the laws of evolution apply to *Homo sapiens* as an animal organism, but they also applied, so it was said, to the human mind and to human societies. Among several others, it is surely the name of the British philosopher Herbert Spencer that must be mentioned here as the thinker who bridged the gap to include human beings, their souls, their history, and their future in the universal processes of evolution. Herbert Spencer was convinced that there was only one great universal law of evolution, which applied altogether to the physical world and to the evolution of human beings and their societies from the most primitive time down to our own time. Spencer's great universal law was based on the observation that the more advanced species – that is, those

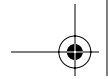




species that were more mobile, better adapted to movement and change, and that were therefore in a better position to survive – were those characterized by a greater heterogeneity of their parts. According to Spencer, it was therefore possible to specify the age of all beings by the degree of heterogeneity or differentiation that they exhibited. This law was the real explanation, according to Spencer, for the survival of the fittest, which had been observed but which was regarded as a special law of the great general law of evolution. According to Spencer, this law could be applied to humans as individuals, the adult having a much more differentiated mind and psychology than the infant and the young child. Spencer also thought that the same difference could be observed between the so-called civilized human and the primitive, the latter having a rather simplified intellectual view of nature, life, and society. Finally, the same law of evolution also applied to societies, which had been through a long process of evolution, starting with the loosely organized primitive tribes, where a certain form of communism was the norm; which had practically no political authority and still less political structure, very little hierarchy; and where marriage and private property were practically unknown. Compared to those primitive and homogeneous societies, the modern Western industrial society was regarded by Spencer as the other extreme: the complex and differentiated society, made up of a great number of different parts, groups, and associations. But Spencer was convinced that this modern society was only a transition to something else, which he described as a completely individualistic society with practically no political authority, a society that will be differentiated to the point that each individual will have the freedom to be what he or she wants and to behave according to his or her own moral standards, which, Spencer thought, will be more and more generally good without necessarily being the same. It is because of those convictions that Spencer has been the extreme representative of the liberalism of the nineteenth century. Liberals of that time, especially in the United Kingdom, were strongly opposed to any intervention of the state as well as of the church in the lives of individuals because they were convinced that the ideal society would be one in which each member had a mature moral conscience, which would result from general education, higher standards of living, and a greater political consciousness.

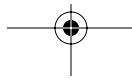
This extension of evolutionism to humankind and its history, which was also called social Darwinism, was based on some quite simple postulates. First, there was the postulate that change was necessarily bringing progress because change was necessarily a transition from a more homogenous and a less well-structured stage to a more heterogeneous and therefore better-adapted stage. Long before Spencer, Auguste Comte had divided sociology into what he called the sociology of order – that is, the sociology that studied the social structures – and what he

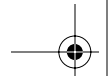




called the sociology of progress, which was the sociological study of history and change. Second, social Darwinism was based on the postulate of unilinear evolution. That is to say, one general rule of evolution and a consequence of the idea of progress was that change was taking place along a straight line that was always pointing in the direction of progress. Consequently, in Spencer's view, the primitive societies were all vestiges of some points along that line. For various reasons, those societies had stopped somewhere along the line of evolution. It was therefore useful to study them, especially in a comparative way, because they provided us with precise knowledge on the successive steps through which the human society has evolved from the beginning of human consciousness to our times. The third postulate is that both long-term evolution and history have a meaning that stems from the pattern of evolution, that can be observed for the past, and that will necessarily be followed in the future. Of course, it is always possible for humans, as it has been in the past for humans and for other living organisms, to resist the line of evolution; it is always possible to counteract or to oppose oneself to the trend of the future. But, as we can learn from the past, those who do that are in danger of being left off somewhere along the line of evolution, while those who follow the right pattern of evolution will be better equipped for the future and will move ahead toward more and more progress.

This conception of human evolution and of the meaning of history has probably been best exposed by Herbert Spencer. But it did not die with Spencer, and it did not end with the nineteenth century. Far from that, it is still very largely shared in the modern world; I would even say that it is now part of the background of our Western culture, among the intellectuals as well as among the population at large. Of course, it is not necessarily expressed in the same terms as those used by Spencer. But the general idea of social Darwinism is still well alive in our minds. Let me give one example of it. I think it is clear enough that the so-called Quiet Revolution that took place in Quebec, starting somewhere in the 1950s and becoming visible mostly in the 1960s, was inspired by an ideology of progress that was based on some more-or-less explicit social Darwinism. Throughout the 1960s it was widely said in Quebec that we, Quebecers, needed to make a certain number of changes in order not to be kept outside of the North American industrial society. It was said time and time again that we were underdeveloped and poor because we had not taken the right steps in the right direction. Education in Quebec was especially regarded as backward, misadapted to the modern world, the vestige of a preindustrial society. Educational reform was therefore one necessary step toward the improvement of our society and a better adaptation to the requirements of the society of tomorrow. It was assumed that if we did not undertake this reform, Quebec and especially the French Canadians in Quebec, were condemned to stay where they were on the line of evolution, leaving to





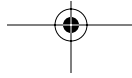
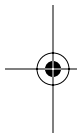
others the advantages that come to those who follow the patterns of evolution and change, the advantages that the industrial and postindustrial societies seem to promise.

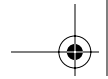
More generally, this applies not only to Quebec but to all the emerging nations of the Third World. Whether they use the socialist model, or the capitalist one, or a mixed one that they think will be more adapted to their situation, the emerging nations of the Third World have been very deeply influenced by the social Darwinist ideology, even though they will never refer to that ideology explicitly. But it is surely one remnant of the colonial regime that the emerging nations have been profoundly influenced by their white colonial administrators, whose ideals they now use as models and norms to measure their change and to make plans for the future.

We can therefore say here that some apparently modest scientific discoveries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided the main elements for the new ideology of change and history that was to compete in the twentieth century with the old theological vision of the world. Indeed, the latter is not necessarily dead; it is alive and still finds expression in many ways. But it has been replaced more or less completely in certain quarters by a very strong and deeply entrenched ideology of change based on a social Darwinist conception of the world, physical, organic, psychological, and social.

But the situation is still more complex due to the presence of a third ideology of great importance: the socialist interpretation of humankind and of history. In a way, we can say that it is the youngest of all three because it took shape only in the first half of the nineteenth century in some European countries, especially England, Germany, and France. But one could also bring a good deal of evidence to prove that the socialist ideology has roots that go back much further in the history of the Western world. I don't think, however, that we should go into that argument here.

Socialism has one characteristic in common with the evolutionist ideology: It is a secular representation of the world and its history. On that ground, both ideologies are in complete opposition to the theological one. Neither of the two has any otherworldly dimension. Still more, as presented and developed by some thinkers, both were and still are, at least to a very large extent, highly critical of the theological ideology. Conversely, representatives of the latter have condemned successively each of the former in vigorous terms. I think that the Roman Catholic Church has been especially vocal in doing so. For instance, I remember that in 1952, when I joined the faculty of Laval University, there was an annual religious ceremony that took place in the chapel of the old seminary of Quebec on December 8 – that is, on the day of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception –

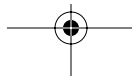


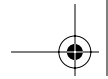


which had been defined as the anniversary of Laval University. During that ceremony, the rector or president of the university, who indeed was a priest or a monseigneur, used to read in front of us and in our name a pledge called the antimodernist pledge, which was a detailed condemnation of all the heresies and fallacies and misconceptions that were not allowed to be taught in a Catholic university. Of course, it was understood that all members of the faculty were Roman Catholics or at least Christians. And I remember that the authorities of the university were proud to say that in the Faculty of Medicine, one highly respected professor was an atheist, which proved that we were rather broadminded!

But it was always mentioned that this professor was a Frenchman and that he was a recognized authority in his field. Moreover, although he did not attend the religious ceremony of the December 8, he was respectful of the Roman Catholic Church and of the sectarian character of Laval University. I don't know exactly when this oath was read for the last time, but I can say that it was still taken quite seriously in 1952. Thereafter, it started to be questioned more and more as a vestige of out-dated positions of the Church, and it was finally discarded. But I must emphasize that my appointment to the faculty and the gradual disappearance of this ritual were mere coincidence! As to the anti-Communist position of the Roman Catholic Church, it is surely too well known to be documented here. While the antipositivist position of the Roman Catholic Church is now less openly asserted, anti-Communism is still predominant. In 1952 an atheist could be tolerated at Laval University. But an openly Marxist historian, or economist, or philosopher would have been unthinkable, surely at Laval and at the University of Montreal, and probably also in all our Canadian universities. But in our universities, at least, the main reason was not only that Marxism threatened the existing social order, but much more that it was a materialist philosophy of life that had been severely condemned by the Vatican and by our bishops.

One reason why the Roman Catholic Church and Christians in general have been so strongly antisocialist and anti-Communist is that socialism, and especially Marxism, is a total philosophy of life, much more so than positivism and social Darwinism. Dialectical materialism, which can be regarded as the core and the most highly generalized expression of socialist thought, covers altogether a representation of the natural world, the position of human beings in the cosmic order, and a main key for the understanding of human history. Just like the universal law of evolution was regarded by Spencer as the final word to explain the world, so it is with dialectical materialism with regard to the socialist outlook on the world. On the other hand, dialectical materialism is not exactly a law, in the positivist sense of the word. It is rather a general epistemological and methodological foundation that is basic altogether to our knowledge of world



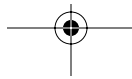
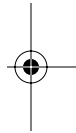


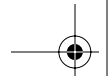
history and policy making, and it is at the same time the main rule for practical action, both individual and collective. In that sense, dialectical materialism is a totalitarian view of humankind and its history, because it embraces the totality of humankind and offers a definite blueprint for its future.

But paradoxically enough, it is also through the theory of dialectical materialism that socialism has three characteristics in common with the two preceding ideologies. The first one, which is of great importance for our purposes, is that they all share optimistic views on the future of humankind. The theological ideology of history can not be pessimistic about the future since its end is necessarily the kingdom of God. Evolutionist positivism, for its part, is also necessarily optimistic because it is heading toward an ever-increasing progress. As to the socialist view of the future, it forecasts the coming of a new society where alienation and injustice will progressively disappear to the extent that private property, which has been the source of all inequalities, will disappear, and also to the extent that the state, after a period of inflation with the dictatorship of the proletariat, will wither away and finally disappear.

The second characteristic that the three ideologies have in common is a certain form of fatalism. In the case of the theological ideology, humans can resist the will of God, they can oppose the will of God, but in the end the kingdom of God will necessarily triumph, the forces of evil will finally be defeated and with them all the individuals and societies that have lined up with them. In the evolutionist perspective, those individuals and societies that do not recognize or cannot recognize and follow the general laws of evolution will either disappear or be left aside, and there will be groups and collectivities as well as individuals who will progress according to the laws of change. As to the socialist ideology of history, it is based on the conviction that the capitalist society is close to its end, that it will necessarily explode and breakdown. Of course, this inevitable breaking-down of the capitalist society can be postponed or delayed by the action of some groups or by the lack of action of some other groups, but it is sure that it cannot be postponed very long. And a new classless society will finally succeed to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Finally, along with this fatalism, all three ideologies make some room for the intervention of human beings. The theological ideology calls for the action of individuals of good will, those who have understood the message of God and who struggle in various ways for the kingdom of God. In the evolutionist perspective, human beings must actively seek the knowledge they need in order to understand the great laws of change and to master history as well as nature according to those laws. The socialist ideology holds that humans not only must get the right objective knowledge, but must also get organized and fight to bring



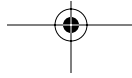


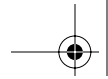
about the necessary revolutions that will change the power structure to the advantage of those who have been exploited up to now: that is, the working class and the proletariat.

In Canada, like in all North America, the place where the socialist ideology is best represented is probably our colleges and universities, much more than the working class and the proletariat. I think there are good reasons for this, the main one being probably that socialism, and especially Marxist socialism, is presently the sole coherently critical interpretation of capitalist society and the most promising blueprint for a better world of tomorrow. And in an advanced industrial society like the North American one, some intellectuals and some youth are among those who are the most sensitive to the ideal of justice and to the need for drastic social changes. But at the same time, this means that in our country this ideology is still only very mildly influential, to say the least, compared to the two others. But the same cannot be said of the rest of the world, where the socialist ideology under different forms (Marxist-Leninist, Maoist, Stalinist, non-Marxists, etc.) now has a very large audience and is one of the main factors that will determine the history of the coming decades, if not of the coming centuries.

But I don't want to leave the impression that I believe that the socialist ideology is the only living one or that it is the dominant one. On the contrary, I do believe that all three ideologies have a very profound influence on our modern thinking. To speak only of the Western world, it is altogether still deeply Christian in its way of thinking, profoundly positivist and evolutionist in its conception of the world and of history, and more and more socialist in its representation of the present society and its future. Although quite divergent from one another, and conflicting on some points, these three ideologies represent three aspects of modern humans that are not necessarily well integrated but that co-exist in our personalities and in our collective minds.

I think that what I have just said will now help me to explain in what sense I think that these three representations of history are three forms of what I now call mythical thinking. One thing must be very clear: The word "myth" does not necessarily have a negative meaning; it does not necessarily mean something false or untrue. As far back in the past as we can go, human beings have always used mythologies to explain to themselves where they come from, what they are, where they are going, and not only themselves as individuals but also and maybe still more the society or collectivity to which they belong. It is through these mythologies that human life has had any meaning at all for billions and billions of men and women in all types of societies and cultures and civilizations, under all latitudes, and in a great variety of climates. I do believe that these mythologies are essential to human beings. We are, at least to our knowledge,





the only animal that has developed this abstract world of myths and mythologies because we are the only animal that feels the strong need to give some meaning to life, to our presence in this world, and that needs some views on what the future will be for us or our descendants.

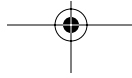
Although it may appear somewhat shocking, the three ideologies of history that I have outlined belong to this world of mythical thinking. For the benefit of our intelligence of the world, they put order in the otherwise chaotic past and present, and in the insecure future that lies ahead of us.

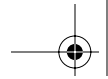
But then, the problem that they raise is the following: Is there any truth in these ideologies? Which one is closer to the truth than the others? Is the image of humankind and its history and its future that is provided by these ideologies reliable? And behind these question marks, there is one question that is more fundamental, which we finally cannot escape, and it can be phrased in very simple terms: Has human history any meaning at all? And how can we know that history has some kind of meaning?

PART TWO

Thus far I have provided a very broad overview of the three main philosophies of history that have had and still have an influence on our thinking and our vision of the world: the religious, Judeo-Christian tradition of interpretation of history; the scientific evolutionist and positivist ideology; and the socialist ideologies. I have used the words “myths” and “mythologies,” and I have applied them to these three currents of thought. But I have not used these words in a derogatory manner but rather in the anthropological sense, meaning that they are broad representations of the past as well as rather coherent interpretations of the present with some kind of a blueprint for action in the future.

Let me continue by disclosing one of the main sources of inspiration for the reflections that follow. Strangely enough, the author to whom I am alluding or from whom I will borrow his *vision du monde* is not a sociologist, he is not a historian, and he is not a contemporary either. He is a philosopher who lived and wrote in the second half of the nineteenth century and whose work is still partially known: His name is Friedrich Nietzsche. In my opinion, the nineteenth century has been the greatest intellectual century of the Western world, and we still live on the heritage of the great thinkers of that century. Compared to the nineteenth century, the twentieth century is far from being as productive and as creative. I might point out that two out of the three great mythologies that I have presented – namely, the positivist evolutionist one and the socialist one – have found their expression through and have been shaped by an impressive number of thinkers of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century is surely more



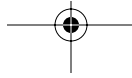


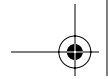
advanced technically than the nineteenth century, and we have surely achieved a greater control over nature now than then, to the extent that we have spoiled nature like none of the other generations before us. But the horizons of human thought have been extended by thinkers of the nineteenth century many more times than by thinkers of the twentieth century. Our century has yet to give birth to individuals of the stature of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Hegel, Darwin, Spencer, and Nietzsche. I would make an exception for Freud and Jung, who created the theory of the unconscious and laid the ground to psychoanalysis in the first decade of the twentieth century. But it is well known now that both Freud and Jung, especially the second, who was more explicit about it, were deeply influenced by Nietzsche, who wrote fascinating pages many years before them on the unconscious in the human being, on the interpretation of dreams, and on the symbolism of dreams.

I must admit that I have come to Nietzsche's works rather late in my life. But I have an excuse for that. Nietzsche's books, which were published at the end of the nineteenth century, were far from being bestsellers. And after his death in 1900, his works were expurgated by his sister before being published again because it had been felt that his thought was too explosive. It is only recently that Nietzsche's works have become more accessible to English- and French-speaking readers.

It is not easy to speak about Nietzsche and his influence. We do not all read the same thing in Nietzsche's works. For my part, I have been especially influenced by the general critical and skeptical approach that is characteristic of Nietzsche's thought and that goes right to the heart of the dogmas that human beings have created all around them and of which they have become prisoners although these dogmas are self-created. Nietzsche called himself the immoralist, by which he meant that he was questioning the recognized and dominant dogmas and ethics that are taken for granted, and in so doing he was recovering the freedom that human beings have lost, because this freedom is based essentially on the understanding that human beings are mainly responsible for their own lives, for their own destiny, and for their own history. In my view, Nietzsche has shaken in a very lucid and radical way the foundations of our beliefs, not only our religious beliefs as is usually thought, but also our scientific and pseudo-scientific beliefs.

For my own purposes, I want to bring forward one main lesson that I learned from Nietzsche. It has become more and more clear to me that human beings have too easily relied upon ends and purposes and objectives that were external to them in order to explain and justify their motivations and their actions. And this is especially true when we come to the interpretations that have been given to explain human history, past, present, and future. Thus in the three great





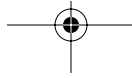
interpretations of history that I have presented, the will of God, progress taken as an absolute, and the historical revolutionary role of the working class have been successively invoked as main agents and goals of history. In each case, therefore, human beings are prevented from being the main agents of their own lives and of their own history.

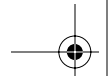
Behind this critical approach, one of Nietzsche's fundamental contributions to our understanding of human beings is his assertion that human beings have been afraid to recognize their loneliness and the consequences of their loneliness. It is in order to protect themselves against this feeling of loneliness and the panic it creates in them that human beings have had recourse to a certain number of absolute external beings or ideas whom they could say were bearing the responsibility that humans refused to assume. That is why Nietzsche contended that if human beings accepted that the God they had themselves created was now dead or rather that they had killed their own God, they would have gotten rid of the main obstacle to their acceptance of their loneliness as well as of the freedom that comes with this loneliness.

But God is only one figure that human beings have used to protect themselves against their terrifying loneliness. In Nietzsche's views, the idea of progress and all the other similar ideas put forward by science have served the same purposes. And although Nietzsche did not know Marx's works, he was well aware of the socialist tradition of thought, and, in his mind, the role attributed to the working class or to the masses has also served to disguise and to conceal human beings from themselves.

At the same time that Nietzsche was reminding us of the loneliness that is the characteristic of human experience, he was also emphasizing that human beings have more possibilities than they have been told; they are not as powerless as some philosophers and historians have wanted us to think. When human beings are finally freed from all the dogmas and when they have learned to take their own responsibilities and to shape their own destiny, they will realize that they can rely on a variety of inner resources. Standing up by themselves and taking their lives in their own hands, without any illusion of any sort about themselves, human beings will call upon resources in themselves, and it is through this liberating process that humankind can finally achieve its full destiny and its real calling.

Needless to say, Nietzsche has been regarded and denounced as one of the most threatening enemies of Christianity because he surely was the most astute and the most vocal atheist among the contemporary philosophers. His words "God is Dead" have often been taken as one of the main illustrations of the pernicious attacks against religion in our times. But it has never been really underlined how reluctantly Nietzsche, who was the son of a minister and who had been brought up in a Christian family, came to that conclusion and how threatening this



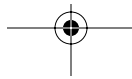
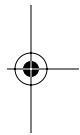


statement appeared to him because of all the consequences that it brought with it. Contrary to the image that is often presented, Nietzsche was not offering this conclusion as good news but as the announcement of something like an earthquake, after which human life and the world would never be again the same as they were before. A good part of Nietzsche's works can be read as a tragic meditation on how human beings can go on living without God – that is, without all of what they have invested in the name of God and to His image and without all they have sacrificed to the idea of God. This is perhaps one of the main reasons for the tragic climate that dominates the writings of Nietzsche.

Although it may not have been underlined as much as his anti-Christian and antireligious position, Nietzsche also represented a threat to the other two ideologies, the positivist and the socialist ones. In his sweeping rejection of any a priori absolute and in his struggle to free human beings from all the ghosts that they have created and in favour of whom they have alienated their freedom and responsibilities, Nietzsche reacted strongly against the belief that science had the answer to all the questions and would provide a full blueprint for a better future for humankind. Nietzsche's attacks against positivism were even more convincing since he himself recognized that he had a positivist period in his life, when he was teaching at the University of Basel in Switzerland and in his first works.

As to the socialist ideology, it is clear that Nietzsche never had any socialist temptation because he was too entirely devoted to the development of the human individual against all the social, cultural, and ideological pressures. This respect for humankind, and his personality, led Nietzsche to adopt elitist positions that took the form of an overemphasized view of the historical power that a few enlightened men and especially a few philosophers enjoyed in modern society. This was necessarily to lead Nietzsche to the opposite pole of the current socialist tradition of thinking.

I know for sure that it is more popular these years to be a disciple of Marx than a student of Nietzsche. And I agree that there are good reasons for that. But I do believe that the Western world and the twentieth century owe a great intellectual debt to that outstanding thinker of the nineteenth century. I do know that Nietzsche has been condemned by many people not only for his atheism, but also for having inspired the German Nazi ideology and probably also some other European Fascism. But Nietzsche has been acquitted of this last charge, founded on some parts of Nietzsche's works but leaving aside the complete architecture of Nietzsche's works – which was, by the way, an advanced denunciation of Nazism and Fascism. The hypothetical fascist trends in the work of Nietzsche are not what I have in mind when I say that Nietzsche has deeply influenced our century. What I really mean is that Nietzsche's critical approach to human beings, their beliefs and myths, their philosophy of history, their more or less hypocritical morality, paved the way to the social critique of this second



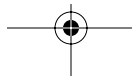


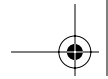
half of the twentieth century and had already announced the so-called counter-culture that runs parallel to the dominant culture of our societies.

In a recent and very enlightening book, the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, who has himself been a Marxist and one of the best interpreters of Marxist philosophy and sociology, has presented the thought of three great German philosophers of the nineteenth century: Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. Henri Lefebvre's position is that our Western modern world of thought is altogether Hegelian, Marxian, and Nietzschean, although those three thinkers were often said to be three opponents. It is well known that Karl Marx struggled all his life against Hegel's idealism. On the other hand, Marx died before Nietzsche started to be known, while Nietzsche did not know Marx and was strongly anti-Hegelian. But the fascinating aspect of Henri Lefebvre's book lies precisely in his *rapprochement* of those three thinkers, without ever confusing them. Lefebvre demonstrates that modern society owes different aspects of what it is now to each of those men, the philosophy of the state having been developed by Hegel, the interpretation of conflict and revolution presented by Karl Marx, and the quest for freedom and authenticity having been taught by Nietzsche.

But my intention in bringing Nietzsche in has more to do with the questions I raised at the end of part one than with what I have just said. From Nietzsche, one learns one great lesson about the understanding of history and social change: We are invited by Nietzsche to question the oversimplified interpretations of history that we are too easily tempted to adopt. One does not have to share Nietzsche's atheist position to think that the history of humankind has not been patterned according to the needs or to the ends of the kingdom of God. Similarly, we can hope that change may sometimes mean progress, but we must also know that this is not necessarily the case, and we know now for sure that progress may mean the destruction of humankind and also maybe of the earth. As to the socialist ideology, with which I must admit that I am in sympathy, one must recognize that its predictions have not been realized since there has been no revolution of the working class in any of the capitalist industrial societies and also because the socialist ideology has been implemented in rural countries, where it has finally become another model of industrialization parallel to the capitalist one and finally more and more similar to the latter. To explain this failure, the question has been raised of whether it was in the nature of the socialist regime to be repressive and bureaucratic to a point that has been seldom seen, or whether it is a mere historical accident that the Gulag Archipelago was born and expanded in the country that has been regarded for a long time as the ideal model for all the future socialist nations.

These examples bring me to the conclusion toward which I have been labouring: that it is very difficult to believe that history has some inherent meaning and that it is necessarily oriented toward some future aim. There are too many



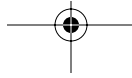
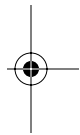


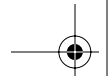
examples to the contrary. If there is any supreme end to human history, if there is any latent meaning behind social change, I think it is still hidden or concealed and still remains unknown. Here, I think, the relativism of the sociologist meets Nietzsche's questioning of supreme and absolute truths standing up "there," outside human beings, dominating them and at the same time giving meaning to their lives.

Spengler and Sorokin have presented history as a kind of big wheel that is turning very slowly. According to both men, human society goes successively through the same three or four periods (like the recurrence of big epidemics), so we can predict where humankind is going in the coming centuries. But the trouble I have always had with these views, however fascinating they may be, is that they are based solely on the history of the Western world, and mostly on the history of the last 1,500 or 2,000 years. Hence I cannot be fully satisfied with these syntheses of history and these panoramic overviews of our past, present, and future. Even though Sorokin was a sociologist (that was not the case with Spengler), I think that his philosophy of history, as well as Spengler's, was more influenced by his value judgments and his normative expectations than by truly sociological foundations. I do believe that philosophical reflections and ethics now cannot do without the social sciences and the knowledge that these sciences are providing. To me, Nietzsche was that kind of philosopher even before the social sciences started to develop. Nietzsche even liked to call himself a psychologist, rather than a philosopher, which was true in many respects, and I would personally add that he was also one of the forerunners of sociology, although he is not yet recognized at all by contemporary sociology. His philosophical questioning was always inspired by psychological and sociological observations of his own. That is surely one reason why Freud and Jung have read Nietzsche and why Jung especially has explicitly recognized the debt he owed him.

If, following Nietzsche, we turn to the social sciences in order to find inspiration for a more realistic philosophy of history, what kind of knowledge do they provide us that might shed some light on the meaning of history? The answer is probably less simple than the one we get through our own wishes and through the most popular current ideologies. Consequently, the answer is also less interesting for many people because it does not necessarily support the commitment to one clearly defined cause, or side, or ideology.

I think that sociologists must say that there are no clear and definite aims that can be regarded as the alpha and omega of history, besides those that human beings themselves put forward or take for granted and that they try and struggle to implement. This means that if and when some goals that groups of people or societies are pursuing happen to be reached, it is not necessarily because they were already written somewhere in golden letters either by God or by some

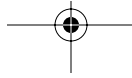


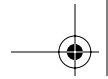


historical necessity. It is rather because some individuals have strongly believed in those goals, have made them their ideals, and have devoted time and energy and sometimes their lives and the lives of many others to achieving them. Of course, not all goals pursued by individuals or groups of individuals are finally achieved. There are probably many more that are not than there are that are implemented. It is precisely to explain this difference that one might say that the goals that are reached were falling in line with the great laws of history and were bound to succeed, while the others were either coming too late or too early or were just not congruent with the development of history. But what does that mean? I think it is just begging the question since it means that we can judge the historical merits of human wishes, ideals, aspirations, goals, and ends simply by what really happens.

The historical actions of human beings take place through a great number of conditions, factors, constraints that more or less favour the attainment of human goals. Some of these factors are attached to the individual and human action, while others are external to the individual. Those attached to the individual are such things as the level of intelligence, the astuteness, the cleverness that some people put into the implementation of their goals, as well as the amount of work, energy, vitality, enthusiasm, and emotional involvement that some people are willing to put into the pursuit of their ideals. Another series of human factors has to do with the quality of the group of individuals who have joined their forces in order to achieve some common goals. Most of the time, those various human factors seem to be taken for granted by the philosophers of history. But in so doing, they conceal all the voluntaristic elements of history, which, in my view, cannot be explained without the intervention of human beings because this intervention represents the margin of freedom and initiative that is left to us. And by this, I don't mean that psychology has all the answers to the questions raised by history. On the contrary, I believe that the social sciences in general have tended to overemphasize some general laws or some general characteristics that tend to conceal the role played by the convergence of a certain number of factors attached to some of the actors implied in the processes of change. The social sciences have too often buried human grandeur, power, and margin of freedom in emphasizing determinisms.

Finally, we now come to what is usually put first: a series of determinisms or constraints that either contribute to limiting the actions of human beings or favour some orientations rather than some others. These are, for instance, the physical constraints that are related to the natural resources, the climate, the physical geography of the environment; they are also the demographic limitations, which have to do with such things as the density of the population, its dispersion over a more-or-less wide territory, the distribution of the population by age, and so



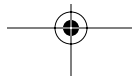
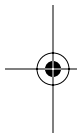


on. There are also some economic determinisms, such things as the type of property that has been traditionally maintained, the state of the technology, the development of the labour force, the conditions of transportation, the amount of capital available, and so forth. Political factors also play the role of constraints or conditioning factors, such as the power structure, the organization of the management of the resources (human and physical), the amount and the quality of the information that those in power receive and can use. Finally, some cultural factors are also at play to condition the orientation of history, such as religious beliefs, the interpretations of history that are currently accepted, the images of human beings and nature that are currently dominant. However, now, even the most physical of these forces are being submitted to some human action that modifies them, not to speak of the economic and political reality that is, to a certain extent, self-made. Hence why do we speak of determinism?

While I am in that vein, let me finally add one last factor that is usually taken for granted, although it should not be: sheer good luck or bad luck, chance, coincidence, which also enter into the fabric of history under the form of some accidental events or circumstances that bring together specific conditions favourable or unfavourable to the orientation of history in one direction rather than in another one. As an example, I think it has been bad luck for socialism that the first country to implement the model of a socialist nation was the USSR. The repressive, authoritarian, and bureaucratic socialist society that was shaped by Stalin was rooted in the traditions of tsarist society, which had not gone through a so-called democratic revolution previous to the socialist revolution.

By now it is probably clear what I have been aiming at with this enumeration of factors that must be taken into account in the interpretation of history: I wanted to underline the fact that no single explanation can be regarded as universally valid, that no general principle seems to lie behind the processes of history. There is no one specific determinism that can be singled out as providing the final and only valid interpretation of what takes place. Actual history is the outcome of a great variety of intermingling and intertwining factors, some of which are external to individuals and some others closely related to human actions. History is therefore the outcome of a mixture of voluntarism, determinisms, and accidents; it is made up of a complex interplay of a great variety of different elements.

Still more, this complexity of the historical process increases with the increasing complexity of societies themselves. The more complex and differentiated societies are, the more difficult it is to apply a simple unilinear model of change to their historical processes. This is especially the case with modern industrial societies. In the smaller primitive or traditional or illiterate societies, the role of some determining factors as well as the influence of some specific individuals or groups were probably much easier to pinpoint. But our complex industrial





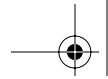
societies, socialist as well as capitalist, cannot be easily put into some simple formula. In these societies, one can identify at the same time several sources of change, some being complementary while others are contradictory or conflicting. For instance, one can identify a variety of human agents of change who are attempting to influence the history of the societies according to several more-or-less contradictory or conflicting orientations at the same time. It is therefore of the utmost importance to underline the fact that no specific group has the monopoly of influence, that no specific group can be said to be the privileged agent of change in our complex differentiated societies.

I think that this goes enough against some current ideas about change to deserve some explanation. Many things have been said these last years on how history is largely determined by the actions of two groups – namely, the youth and the working class – who have been singled out as the main agents of change and as the two groups that are mostly responsible for the present evolution of society and who will surely shape the future. I personally hold that the influence of those two groups has been highly exaggerated and is far from what some wishful thinking has made it.

With regard to the youth, I think this mistake could be made because there has been a short period of contemporary history, let us say from 1955 to 1970, during which the youth have been very vocal, questioning modern society, protesting against a certain number of things. This has brought some sociologists to believe that the youth will now have in the future the historical role that Karl Marx attributed to the working class. But I do personally think that several observations must lead us to question this viewpoint as being very largely mythological and utopian. Let me present here three observations that seriously limit the actual role of the youth in contemporary history. First, the young have not invented new ideas and new values in these last years. Rather, when we look at it carefully, one must conclude that the youth were expressing ideas that were very largely borrowed from elder people. The youth have taken it upon themselves to diffuse those ideas and to apply some of them, but they did not create them. Those so-called new ideas had already been expressed in many ways, and we can trace them back very clearly to either some schools of Marxist thought, like Marcuse, Althusser, Habermas, or to some schools of social criticism, like C. Wright Mills or Alvin Gouldner, or to some literary works, like those of Jack London, William Faulkner, Steinbeck (before he became reactionary), and many others. One can say that the youth have been more receptive for a while to these ideas and to these authors, most of whom were in turn relating themselves to quite a long tradition of critical thought.

Second, one should not speak of the youth, as if a whole generation was altogether engaged in a movement of protest. As a matter of fact, protest was mostly to be found among a specific class of youth: the student youth. And even



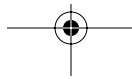


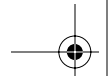
then it has always been only a minority among the student youth who were seriously and actively engaged in the movement of protest. The majority of the youth have always been much more fundamentally conformist than has been said and thought for a while and by some social scientists.

Finally, the period of protest by the youth was rather short-lived: It lasted at best about fifteen years – and probably less than that. Since the beginning of the 1970s, the movement of protest among the youth has slowed down and practically died. For the last five or six years, the youth have entered a period of conformism. Even though they may be talking about change, they have developed a clear fear of change. Indeed, they have good reasons for that. The economic recession, the fuel crisis, the inflation, the saturation of the labour force, coupled with the society of consumption that is more dominant than ever, are all factors that have contributed to integrating the youth in the dominant system to the point that they have no more interest in changing things. Because the spirit of the society of consumption is very largely shared by the youth, who have grown up in a period of prosperity and comfort, a strong individualism has developed that has resulted finally in personal aspirations for social mobility and wellbeing, which in fact go against any ideology of social change. On the whole, the youth are much more integrated in the society of today and are much more part of the so-called system than they say and than they are said to be.

I do believe that protesting against the total society and the dominant system requires a good deal of psychological and social maturity. Therefore, those who are seriously protesting are not to be found mostly among the youth, but among elder and more mature people, who have really suffered from the dominant system and who have been severely frustrated by it or who have for one reason or another decided to devote their lives to changing society. And those people know something of the rules of the game, something that the youth ignore.

All this does not mean that the youth have no historical role at all. As has been very well documented by Karl Mannheim, each generation introduces something new just because it has been brought up in a unique historical period and has therefore internalized the traditional culture in a unique way, emphasizing some aspects of it and deemphasizing others. It might happen, as I think it did in the 1960s, that one generation of young may have a more visible influence mainly for two reasons: One is that they are suddenly more numerous for a short while; the second that they have been brought up in a period of more rapid and drastic changes. But this is rather exceptional, and it does not necessarily last very long, as we have witnessed in our own lifetime. The youth can therefore be said to be sometime agents of change, but they are neither the only ones, nor the dominant ones, nor the most influential ones. They surely don't have the monopoly on protest, on new ideas, and on new values.

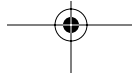
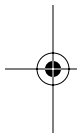


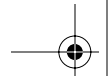


It is only recently that some historical role has been attributed to the youth. The role attributed to the working class has a much longer tradition insofar as it goes back to the origin of socialist thought – that is, to the beginning of the nineteenth century. In a way, the historical role attributed to the working class has a more respectful and honourable past, and much more has been said and written about it than about the role of the youth. But here again, in my opinion, part of what has been said about the working class is also mythological and utopian. Three observations must also be brought up here, which serve to illustrate the limitations of that mythology. First, if we just remain empirical and factual, one must recognize that the history of the modern revolution is very poor evidence of the role of the working class in bringing about drastic changes. Most of the great modern revolutions, starting with the French and the American ones, up to the Russian and Chinese ones, have not been carried out by workers but by either the small bourgeoisie, or the army, or the peasants. This is surely not because the workers were not frustrated and alienated by the capitalist society. On the contrary, they were alienated to the point that they were unable to organize themselves and to conduct a revolution.

Second, in modern societies, the working class is less and less clearly delineated. It was much more of an entity in the nineteenth century, when socialists could quite clearly identify its boundaries. The working class was then clearly demarcated altogether by its clothing, its housing, its complete lack of education, its geographical location. All those boundaries have been more or less blurred. Moreover, and very significantly, unionism is not limited to the working class any more: white collars are now members of the labour unions in greater number than the workers, and trade unions are now related to the middle class more tightly than to the working class. Still more, it is usually the white-collar workers and middle-class people who represent the radical wings in the labour unions much more than the workers, who are generally more conservative. All the major labour conflicts of Quebec right now involve many more white collars than blue collars, many more teachers and civil servants than industrial workers.

The notion of class consciousness is of prime importance in the socialist doctrine, at least in traditional Marxist thought. Class consciousness is the main dynamic element that brings to the working class its revolutionary mood and impetus, thus making of the social class an agent of social conflict and social change. It is when the working class becomes conscious of its alienation, economic but also political and cultural, and when it becomes aware of its possibilities of action to change things, that it can develop some plans of action, some strategies, and turn from apathy to action. All this makes sense, and it has been supported by empirical sociological research in Europe, in North America, and in South America. But at the same time, what is very clear also is that this



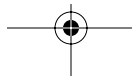


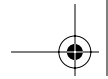
class consciousness is not a spontaneous creation and that intellectuals who do not belong to the working class contribute very largely to its emergence. They feed from the outside the class consciousness of the working class with some content, with information and goal orientations. Such has been the case with all the great revolutions of the last centuries, as well as the ones that took place in our century. It therefore means that the working class is potentially an agent of change, though not probably the main revolutionary agent, provided it is inspired by intellectuals who belong to the bourgeoisie and who serve as catalysts and *animateurs* of the actions of the working class.

In short, the working class is not necessarily the main agent of revolutionary change and certainly is not the sole one. Moreover, the notion of class consciousness has often served to hide the fact that some intellectuals play a dominant role in the revolutionary process. Not all intellectuals, indeed. Intellectuals have not, any more than any social groups, the monopoly on protest and change, a good number of them being integrated into a system in which they have vested interests. But following Karl Mannheim here again, I am inclined to think that in the modern world, at least, some groups of intellectuals have had a much more active role in the processes of change than is usually recognized, even by intellectuals themselves. These intellectuals usually have no power, but they have influence and, as writers, teachers, researchers, journalists, *chansonniers*, serve to define the situation, following W.I. Thomas's expression. They usually are not efficient in strategies and in concrete action, but they provide ideas and some abstract scheme of thought that, when implemented by others, may sometimes become explosive. But, mind you, I don't want to replace the mythology of the working class with the mythology of the intelligentsia I just want to illustrate the idea that no group has the monopoly on the engineering of historical change.

Another myth must also be explored here: the idea that protest and action are taking place mostly in the urban setting and that changes spread from the cities to the country. Indeed, we live in a civilization that is largely dominated by the cities, at least demographically and economically speaking, so we take for granted that important things are taking place where we live and that this is where great movements and great agitation take place.

We therefore tend to ignore too easily the protest and the revolts of the rural and peasant populations throughout history and in our own times. For instance, we have too easily built the image of the Canadian peasant, and still more of the Quebec *habitant*, as a quiet and submissive person. But those of us who have lived in the country, who have grown up on a farm, or who have been associated with the rural population, know pretty well that our farmers are protesting almost every day against nature, the sun, the moon, the rain, their parish priests or ministers, the urban world, the tourists, God, the devil, and the governments.





The peasants are permanent protesters, especially those who live in more marginal regions or in the frontier regions. And recently we have witnessed the anger of the rural population in North America, in Canada as well as in Quebec, and in France. Because we are an urbanized population, we keep the memory of what has taken place in our cities, and sometimes only of those protests that have taken place on our campuses. We speak of the great revolts of the students at Berkeley in 1964, or in Paris in May 1968, or in Quebec in October 1968. But were we peasants, instead of urbans, we would claim the great revolutionary moment of October 1974, when farmers went as far as killing a great number of calves, which carries, I think, much more impact than the occupation of some dean's office.

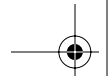
Finally, I am sure that in Ottawa a good number of people will agree with me if I say that civil servants and especially higher civil servants have something to say in social change. This is still more true with the expansion that the state has known over the last decade and with the new roles it has entered. Maybe better than anyone else, Hegel forecasted, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, this expanding development of the state in the modern world.

And Hegel saw it not only as a necessity but also as an ideal, since the state was in his mind the bearer of the spirit of the society, the locus where all the great ideas meet and through which the destiny of the collective mind and body can best be achieved. Many people are today less euphoric about the extended role of the state than Hegel was, and I think that in particular the examples that we have seen in this century of state socialist societies have convinced more and more people who, like me, have sympathies for a socialist society to look for some other form of socialism in which the state would be less omnipotent and omnipresent.

Nonetheless, even taking into account this omnipresence of the state, all the studies dealing with the role of civil servants have made clear that their influence is limited by many constraints, such as the vested interests and the fear of change that are generally to be found among politicians, the power that the more conservative wings among the civil servants generally enjoy, the brakes that are applied by civil servants themselves when orders and directives go down the line or when the information goes up the line, the influence of the pressure groups and of the lobbies that are permanently in action around those in power, and more generally the conservative climate that prevails in our large, complex societies of consumption.

I think I have said enough in support of my view that the making of history is the monopoly of no group and of no specific elite and of no class of citizens in our modern industrial society. Neither the youth, nor the working class, nor the intellectuals, nor the bureaucrats, nor the capitalists are the sole or the main

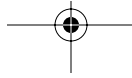


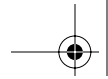


agents of change. The drive to bring about some changes is spread throughout many sectors of society, and it is to be found as a potentiality in a great variety of groups, which are not necessarily pushing in the same direction but sometimes in conflicting directions. Such is the situation because we now live in pluralist societies – that is, in societies that are made up of a growing number of parts, elements, segments that are more or less in a permanent state of possible conflicts or at least that pursue more-or-less conflicting interests. Therefore, this type of society always generates new reasons to protest, which may vary almost indefinitely from one period to another, from one milieu to another. Therefore, one must very seldom expect that all the reasons to protest will suddenly be shared by everyone at the same time. To me, that is probably the main reason why radical revolutions are less and less possible and plausible in our modern complex society. Protest weakens as far as it is multiplied. Therefore, there are fewer chances of change when more groups are looking for some change.

I may also add that the propensity to change has been both enhanced and weakened by the democratization of education in our societies. On the one side, people are becoming more critical of their society as they become more educated. This fact has been illustrated many times by empirical research. Social criticism is more explicit, better structured, and more consciously engaged among those who are more educated. But at the same time, those who are more educated have better defense against the actions of others. Therefore, it is not necessarily because the educated people are more conservative that they may block change, but just because they have their own ideas about what change must be and because there are more and more people who don't wish the same changes.

One may quite easily observe that the propensity to change is often cancelled out in our societies. For example, it happens that great protest movements are neutralized by other similar protest movements that are heading in different directions. One other example is the case of the higher civil servants who quite often serve to interpret the movements of protest in modern societies. By their functions, civil servants must know how to use protest coming from the left and protest coming from the right in order to arrive at a middle-of-the-road solution in which both the right and the left find part of their ideas — that is, at a compromise that satisfies completely no group but that results in a reduction of protest. This kind of action on the part of civil servants is one reason why we can say that modern societies recuperate from all their protest movements. As a matter of fact, modern societies have multiple mechanisms of recuperation and reintegration of protest movements. Therefore, while there always is a significant revolutionary potential in our societies because of the many frustrations that are felt and of the widely spread social criticism, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for drastic social change to take place in our societies. I do believe that



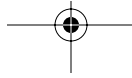


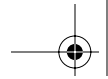
revolutionary change was more plausible in nineteenth-century societies than it is today in advanced industrial societies. For that very reason, I think that the original Marxist analysis had more meaning for change in the beginning of the industrial societies than it has now in the stage of advanced industrial societies. In the latter, the complexity of our societies is such that the social system itself has become functionalist and conservative.

I would also dare say that another factor of recuperation of radical change is to be found in the actions of the revolutionary movements themselves. Although it may seem paradoxical, the most radical revolutionary movements are agents of the recuperation of the revolutionary potential in our societies, the reason being that the radical revolutionary movements express objectives and aims of change that are borrowed by the establishment and spread through the mass media of communication. Both the civil servants and the management of private industries are clever enough to find in those objectives their inspiration and terminology for more moderate policies. As I said earlier, it is one of the main functions of bureaucratic technocrats to go after the new ideas, to understand them, and to integrate them into the official policies of middle-of-the-road governments. Therefore, it is less and less possible for radical movements to succeed in the destabilization and the overthrow of the present system. Reformist change is much more often the outcome of these processes than of drastic and revolutionary change.

Of course, what I have just said is probably not pleasant to hear for some people who want to believe in radical change and in its occurrence, and I must say that it does not appear to me to be an ideal situation. One has more success, at least among some groups, when one keeps closer to some popular ideologies of revolution than I presently do. But I do believe that sociology must teach realism and present an honest picture of how things take place, in order to discriminate between reality and wishful thinking.

In conclusion, I think that I must emphasize the fact that if history has any meaning at all, this meaning is to be found in the interplay of an increasing amount of conflicting influence and actions that oppose one another, sometimes complement or supplement one another, but very seldom point altogether in the same direction. And so it is because history does not belong to one group and does not follow one specific law of evolution. For some people, this might be seen as a demobilizing conclusion because they need the security of thinking that what they believe in will necessarily triumph in the end. This is precisely mythological thinking. In reality, history is more complex precisely because it is open to all kinds of influences. The only way to believe in history is to fight for one's own beliefs and options, knowing very well that the impact that they may have in the future or their failure to succeed will not necessarily be related





to their intrinsic value but to a lot of work on the part of people who share the same ideas, to the strength or weakness of the opposing groups, to the interplay of some external factors, and finally to plenty of good luck.

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Guy Rocher is a Companion of the Order of Canada and a member of the Royal Society of Canada, as well as a member of nine Canadian and foreign learned societies in the fields of sociology, sociology of law, law, and bioethics. He was awarded the 1995 Léon Gérin Prize, the 1999 Sir John William Dawson Medal, and has received two honorary doctorates.

