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Philosophy of History

Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power, by Karl A. Wittfogel. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957, 556 pp.)

Theory and History: An Interpretation of Social and Economic Evolution, by Ludwig von Mises. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957. 384 pp.)

Order and History. Vol. I, Israle and Revelation, by Eric Voegelin. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956. 533 pp.)

REVIEWED BY FRANK S. MEYER, *Journalist and Author*

These three books represent three different facets of a movement in thought which may well turn out to be the most significant intellectual development of the mid-twentieth century: a fundamental transformation in the way of looking at history that has prevailed for more than one hundred years. Each of them in its own sphere contributes to the restoration of a concept of the freedom of men in history all but forgotten beneath the weight of long-dominant theories of historical determinism.

No civilization has ever been more historically minded than Western civilization. There is a sense in which every significant movement of mind in the West since the fall of the Roman Empire has been the expression of a philosophy of history. Certainly the ideologies that have shaped the one hundred years since 1848 have each been based upon a more or less conscious philosophy of history. Socialism, Communism, Fascism, the liberal-progressive outlook—each has held a doctrine of historical development which has given form to its program

In all these philosophies, History has been deified as a ruthless and ineluctable Fate, determining the being of every man. Whether formally materialist, as in Marx and the inspirers of Hitler's racial theories of history; or formally ideal, as in Hegel and Toynbee; or taken on faith and formally undefined, as in the theorists of progress; whether the future proclaimed is grim for mankind and triumphant for a minority, or benignly egalitarian—the pattern of historical

development is always certain and unavoidable, reducing human intentions to meaninglessness. This philosophy of history has reduced choice to accepting or rejecting fate and made a mockery of freedom by defining it, in Hegel's words, as the "recognition" (and acceptance) "of necessity."

It is in contrast to this view of history, and as outstanding contributions to a new vindication of freedom and of the human person in the philosophy of history, that the books under review achieve their importance.

Professor Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism* develops his critique of twentieth century historical myth through an analysis of the condition that led to the great despotisms of the early civilizations. An historical scholar of eminence, one of the century's foremost students of Chinese history, he has brought to his task an immense erudition and a forceful intellect. In development and illustration of his thesis, he uses materials drawn from the history of every human civilization and from investigations of a multitude of pre-civilized cultures.

The overwhelming conclusion which he draws from this evidence is that the great irrigation-based despotisms of ancient and Eastern history were not brought about by economic necessity, but were the result of a failure of the "moral responsibility" of men acting in open historical situations; that the fatalists unilinear theories of history, which reduce men to the status of puppets of social forces, have no factual foundation.

Further, he powerfully argues that the essential difference between a despotic and a free society is the difference between a society in which power exists in a single center and one in which it is multi-centered. Therefore, "strong private property" (*i.e.*, private property which exists in its own right, not by sufferance of the state) is the sign and guarantee of a free society.

Therefore, he maintains that despotism can be repeated in the modern world when the moral autonomy of the individual is destroyed and when private centers of power (based upon private property) are swallowed up by a single centralized state power.

As Professor Wittfogel has by factual investigation undercut the foundations of determinist historiography, so Professor von Mises in his *Theory and History* has attacked the methodological assumptions that buttress its structure. Insisting upon the deep-going difference between a science of means and an ethic of ends, he demonstrates the logical absurdity of deriving a determined form for history (which is the operation of free human actions) from the conclusion of scientific investigation (which is the operation from the point of view of the achievement of control over it). The scientific method is concerned with means, not ends; and it can neither show what ends history should have, nor, since history is what men make it in pursuance of their ends what it will be: "Choosing means is a matter of reasons, choosing ultimate ends a matter of the soul and the will."

Professor von Mises brings to this problem a lifetime of work in economic theory, work which has made him the world's most outstanding economist. *Theory and History* can be considered the application of that experience and the wisdom gained from it to the study of history.

Oriental Despotism and *Theory and History* are primarily concerned with historiographical and methodological critiques of the prevailing determinist history. They contain many suggestions pointing toward a positive theory of history as the arena of freedom; but their main function is critical and analytical. Professor Voegelin's book, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the positive exposition of a theory of history as the struggle of men to break loose from the determined life and thought of the ancient "cosmological empires" (Dr. Wittfogel's "Oriental despotisms") and—inspired by divine revelation—to realize their being as free creatures. Since the appearance of his epoch-making *The New Science of Politics* a few years ago, scholars have been awaiting the publication of his major work, *Order and History. Israel and Revelation*, its first volume, fulfills the promise of *The New Science of Politics* in magnificent amplitude. It places Professor Voegelin at one stride at the level of intellectual power of Spengler and Toynbee, although in sharp ideological opposition to both.

This volume is specifically concerned with the emergence of Israel from the cosmological society of the Egyptian and Babylonia world. It presents the drama of the beginnings of man's self-recognition of his power to choose his fate, and introduces the themes that are to be developed in the forthcoming studies of Greece, of Christianity, and of the modern age.

Complementary to the studies of Dr. Wittfogel and Dr. von Mises, *Israel and Revelation* constitutes with them a scholarly revolution in the field of history, the results of which may be as far-reaching for the future as the physical discoveries of Einstein and Bohr a half a century ago.

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