

CHAPTER I

Images of History in Hegel and Marx

LENIN SAID that the 'three sources and component parts' of historical materialism were German philosophy, British political economy, and French socialism.¹ This chapter concerns the first source. We put forth Hegel's conception of history as the life of the world spirit, and we show how Marx took that conception, preserved its structure, and changed its content. Having acquired an altered image of history, he would then transform it into the theory subsequent chapters will expound and defend.

The world spirit is a person, but it is not a human being. Yet since human beings are the sort of persons most accessible to us, it will be useful to begin by describing one.

The picture which follows is not of an average human being, nor a typical one, and perhaps not even of a possible one. Some important ways in which all men relate to the world are featured in it, and exaggerated. The function of the picture is expository. It is a backdrop assisting the dramatization of a large vision of history.

Here, then, is a man, moving about the world. As he acts, observes, and suffers, the world reveals itself to him, and he reveals himself to it, imposing his demands on it and pursuing his purposes through it. He spiritualizes nature and it impresses a nature on his spirit. He discovers what stones and flowers and water are like, and how to look up at the stars and down canyons. He learns to change the shapes of nature, to mix and separate its elements. He learns how to live, how to make live, how to let live, and how to kill. He gains understanding of the world's glories, charms, deformities, and dangers. He intervenes in it to secure survival, power, and pleasure.

But he also experiences a substance of a different order. He is in contact and in dialogue with himself. There is a contrast between his confrontation with the world outside and his en-

¹ 'The Three Sources', p. 452.

counter with the part of the world he is. In the first exercise he is distinct from what he examines; in the second he is not, and his study must be part of what he studies. He may learn about his surroundings without changing them, but his self-exploration is always also a transformation. It leaves him no longer as he was, investing him with a new self, one more self-aware. And if he would keep hold of his nature he must inspect it afresh: a new nature has supervened on the one he penetrated, because that one was penetrated. His project of self-consciousness is a continual effort which yields continual achievement, a race whose tape is advanced when the finish is reached. It is only possessed by being constantly acquired and only acquired by being constantly developed.¹

Nor is what a man knows about himself unaffected by what he believes about himself, by the conjectures attending his endeavour to see. If he thinks himself confident he is half way to being so. If he thinks himself contemptible, he elicits contempt. Supposing himself to be fragile, he is shaken by minor adversity. He makes himself, guided by an image of what he is, and what he believes he is thus contributes to what he is in fact.

To come to know oneself has rewards but also pains, both in the process and in the product. For in the change of self, old manners, habits which give comfort, a residue of much living, is worried out of existence and an undefended character is born. Reorganization occurs, and reorganization means partial disorganization. Each partly new structure must in time in turn be superseded, else thought and feeling lose their spiritual status, and the man recedes into the animal kingdom. Self-development is the only alternative to that recession: it is not possible to stand still.

Hegel's phrase 'the labour of the negative'² covers this rending work of self-interrogation and self-alteration. Labour, because it is hard; negative, because it is destructive. And the model of a human being, moving painfully and in stages to self-knowledge, helps us to understand the larger movement of human history as Hegel conceived it.

¹ This sentence is drawn from Kierkegaard, who was not, however, discussing self-consciousness. See *Edifying Discourses*, p. 10.

² 'Preface to *Phenomenology*', p. 390.

The story of mankind is unified by the same principle which gathered the exploits of the special individual just described. History is no miscellany of mighty deeds and catastrophes. It is the increase, now gradual, then sudden, in the self-awareness of the *world spirit*, a term whose employment in Hegel's philosophy of history we must now try to explain.

The strictly philosophical derivation of the concept of the world spirit will not be given here.¹ Instead, we consider how Hegel might have defended his use of the concept in his doctrine of society and history.

We begin by noting that the diversity of national characters, now taken for granted, was something of a novelty when it was emphasized by such writers as Montesquieu in France and Herder in Germany in the later part of the eighteenth century. We commonly expect a German to resemble in thought, feeling, and behaviour another German more than either does an Italian. The expectation is not always fulfilled, but this does not upset the fact that the phrases 'typical German' and 'typical Italian' mean something to us, and not the same thing. It may be hard to formulate the differences. We may disagree about their depth, extent, and permanence. We are very likely to disagree about their explanation, supposing we venture explanations of this difficult phenomenon. But we shall all agree that there *are* differences in national characters, however daunting the tasks of describing and explaining them may be.

Montesquieu and Herder found it necessary to insist on what for us is obvious. Their assertion of the existence of different coherent ways of being human opposed that trend within the Enlightenment which conceived men as fundamentally alike across space and time, and which looked to the construction of a science of man whose generalizations would be as free of reference to particular ages and places as were the laws of the modern science of nature. David Hume:

Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English. . . . Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange

¹ For a luminous account of the matter, see Part One of Taylor's *Hegel*, especially Chapter III.