

Vico and Mythology

MAX HORKHEIMER

Regarding all events or occurrences not directly due to conscious human actions, science is wont to address only the question of cause, never the question of purpose. Yet, in view of human suffering and death, the question “What for?” has psychic roots which are too deep to be completely silenced. Whenever attempts to make the present a time of general happiness fail, and whenever utopia—extinguishing accident—cannot be realized, a philosophy of history is bound to arise which detects behind the experienced turmoil of life and death a hidden, benevolent purpose or design, a design through which the individual, seemingly unintelligible and senseless fact or event acquires a definite place and meaning (without being aware of it). If it is true that the construction of such a hidden meaning constitutes the essence of all true philosophy of history, then the Italian Giambattista Vico was the first real philosopher of history in the modern age. For his *magnum opus* endeavors to show that providence governs history and implements its goals via the actions of men—who are neither clearly aware nor need to be aware of these goals. His greatness, though, resides not so much in the construction itself as in the empirical investigations he initiated in that connection.

Vico was born in Naples in 1668 and died there in 1744. This man—who remained almost entirely obscure throughout his life, who served first as tutor and then as poorly paid professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples, and who was a pious Catholic and a petit bourgeois—was in fact not only one of the greatest philosophers of history but also a sociologist and psychologist of considerable stature. In addition, he was an innovator in philosophy: he founded the philosophy of art and he possessed a sense for broad cultural linkages which was largely unequalled not only in his time but also during subsequent centuries. Vico testifies to the fact that the study of

history—provided it aims not at surface descriptions but at the discovery of lawful interconnections—can have universal significance.

The latter insight was acquired by Vico himself in his polemics against Cartesian philosophy. Descartes had died in 1650. In many respects his philosophy pointed toward the future—not only by clearing the path theoretically for an unprejudiced science of nature but also by unleashing progressive trends in philosophy through the foundation of a critical epistemology. Simultaneously the discoverer of analytical geometry, the French philosopher served as guidepost and furnished the methods and terminology for the powerful intellectual energies which buttressed the elaboration of mathematical natural science. Yet, it was not only natural science but also a newly awakening Catholicism which seized the cognitive arsenal of Cartesianism in order to adapt religion to ongoing cultural developments. In Vico's time, Descartes was the dominant philosophical fashion; it was impossible to avoid a confrontation with his thought.

Cartesian philosophy is a philosophical correlate of the fact that the emerging society relied in large measure on the progress of the mathematical natural sciences. The needs of the developing market economy and the necessity of the technical mastery of nature led to the celebration of mathematics as the sole reliable mode of knowledge. Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* and the profound insights of his *Meditations* serve the function in his larger work to establish mathematics as the single form of secure cognition. From the *cogito*-maxim he derives the criteria for the clarity and distinctness of ideas; and he finds these criteria basically fulfilled only in mathematics (from where he had probably surreptitiously borrowed them before he discovered them in the *cogito*). The confrontation with Descartes means a confrontation with the question whether mathematical thought is the true manifestation of the essence of man.

First published in 1725, Vico's *magnum opus*, the *Scienza nuova* or "New Science concerning the Common Nature of the Nations," carried on its title page an allegorical engraving. Among other things, the engraving shows a large sphere or globe resting on an altar and serving as footstool to a woman with winged temples. This globe lies at the edge of the altar which supports it only on one side. This signifies that reality has so far been viewed only from one side or in one respect, namely, "only in regard to the order of nature."¹ According to Vico, the philosophers so far have not examined reality "from the angle which is most proper to men: whose essence has sociability as a central trait" (par. 2). Descartes had championed mathematical

knowledge as the only certain and genuine knowledge on the basis of the principle that we fully know only what we have ourselves made or produced—a principle which historically can be traced from Bacon, Hobbes, and Descartes over Leibniz to Kant and Fichte as a guiding philosophical maxim. What is meant by “we” in this case is the abstract reflection of reason or the isolated apparatus of thought patterned on the model of traditional logic. Vico takes over the principle of the exclusive knowability of the created and even makes it into a yardstick of his philosophy—but attributes to it a completely different and radically new meaning. What men have created and what therefore constitutes the prime target of cognition—those creations in which the essence of human nature and “mind” is most clearly revealed—are not the fictive constructions of mathematical reason but rather the happenings of historical reality. As Vico describes his own approach: “Thus our science proceeds just like geometry which itself creates or constitutes the world of quantities whose principles it establishes and examines; but it proceeds with so much more reality as the institutions governing human affairs are more real than points, lines, planes, and figures are” (par. 349).

Machiavelli had leafed through history as merely a useful source of concrete policies, while Hobbes grandly disregarded historical events in his construction of the social contract: in both cases, genuinely certain science—not only mathematics and natural science but also the theory of man—remained in sovereign isolation and independence from history. With the exception of Hegel and his school, history tends to be viewed in modern philosophy chiefly as a descriptive account of happenings, an account useful for certain practical or edifying purposes but entirely irrelevant to the decisive forms of theoretical knowledge. This kind of metaphysics with its aim to grasp the real world, including the nature of man, without any thorough historical research, encountered effective opposition only in the nineteenth century. Yet Vico—in his rejoinder to the loathed Cartesianism—had already recognized that an inquiry anchored in the presumably autonomous individual is limited and vain and necessarily conducive to erroneous results. Human self-knowledge derives only from an analysis of the historical processes in which men are engaged, and not from mere introspection or inner reflection (as subjective idealism has always contended). Economy, state, law, religion, science, art—all these specifically human creations have their origin in history, and thus cannot be understood from the vantage point of isolated individuals but only from the angle of the

relations between individuals; in Vico's language: from the fact of their sociability.

When Vico calls providence the "queen of human actions" (par. 312), when his own science explicitly seeks to furnish "a demonstration, so to speak, of what providence has wrought in history" (par. 342), faith in a divine purpose and redemptive meaning of history seems to constitute the chief tenor of his philosophy. Yet, whenever he concretely applies the concept of providence, the term basically signifies nothing else but the rule or law whereby men—despite their individualistic, barbarian, and egotistical instincts—are finally led to a social and cultural existence. The surface features of history, among whom Vico counts especially the motives and actions of individuals, are not essential or decisive; rather, without the awareness of individuals and behind their backs (as it were), a series of social formations succeed each other, thus making possible human civilization.

The inquiry into these hidden laws thus becomes the real theme of the "new science." As Vico observes (*ibid.*), the true meaning of the term "providence" emerges from its connection with *divinitas* which in turn derives from *divinari* (to grasp what is hidden). He defines it as the task of his study "to grasp the hidden or concealed in history which operates without the discernment or cooperation of men, and frequently in a manner completely antithetical to their plans (*ibid.*). What Hegel later designated as the "ruse of reason," Vico ascribes to *divinitas*: in and through the chaotic affairs of men, through the relentless struggle of individuals, classes, and peoples, in the midst of suffering and misery on a personal level, despite arrogance, greed, cruelty, fanaticism—sometimes even by means of these vices—providence promotes and establishes humane conditions and finally a rationally guided social life.

To be sure, the question of justice for individual human beings (a question prominent in utopian literature) cannot be resolved through reference to the benevolent intent of divine providence—especially if these individuals were crushed by the wheel of history supposedly leading to progress. Vico at this point finds solace in his Catholicism: whether a man lives in a bright or dark period of history, after his death the supreme judge renders a just verdict. Thus, for Vico, the verdict on individual life remains transcendent to history. In Hegel's case—for whom world history coincides directly with the final judgment and whose religion consists basically in the faith in an immanent teleology, that is, the fulfilment of absolute justice within history—the question of individual suffering is obviated through the denial of the

essential reality of individual life. The comparison of Hegel and Vico shows that, at least in the modern age, the sincere belief in a revealed transcendent religion facilitates a less prejudiced examination of this world than does a pantheistic merger of God and world, reason and reality. Since he retains a transcendent tribunal for individual life, Vico is able to probe the actual course of history in a relatively unprejudiced manner, while also seeking to uncover the inner kinetic laws or the hidden, subterranean tendencies of history. Although by far less grand and comprehensive than Hegel's work (with which it shares many common traits), Vico's opus is also much more empirical and less speculative than the constructions of the great idealist thinker whose aim it was to demonstrate the presence of the divine in this world.

A recapitulation of selected Vichian teachings may convey an impression of the many seminal insights he discovered, insights which science even today has not managed fully to tap or to exhaust. From the works of the philosopher Bacon—whom he greatly admired—Vico took over the distaste for the view that the thinkers of classical antiquity or other philosophers of the past already possessed the highest knowledge about eternal matters and that mankind has never experienced any progress but only decline and impoverishment. As a Catholic, to be sure, Vico was constrained to place divine creation and paradise in accordance with dogma at the beginning of history. However, he used the biblical story of the flood basically in order to remove the existence of that golden age entirely from the province of science; more in accordance with truth, he finds the actual beginning of history shrouded in darkness and barbarism. A major conceit of every nation, the *New Science* states, is “that it before all other nations invented the comforts of human life and that its remembered history goes back to the very beginning of the world”—a tenet which is compounded by the “conceit of scholars who will have it that what they know is as old as the world” (pars. 125, 127). Vico proclaims it an accomplishment of his study “to sweep away all belief in the matchless wisdom of the ancients” (par. 223). As he also postulates: “This is the order of human institutions: first the forests, after that the huts, then the villages, next the cities, and finally the academies” (par. 239). Thus, mankind began its course in a dark and fearful archaic history.

The question arises as to the laws or rules governing the development of civilization. “In order to discover the nature of human affairs,” Vico explains his methodological principle, “our science

relies on a rigorous analysis of human thought regarding what is necessary and useful in social life" (par. 347). Thus, like Machiavelli but in a more deliberate and consistent fashion, he proceeds from the maxim that human modes of production must be explained in terms of necessity, more precisely, as reactions to material needs. Coupled with the primitive psychic traits of early men it is the external conditions of life that furnish the explanatory key to human history. This key is recovered first of all from the available records of earliest times, especially from ancient mythology.

In a bold and magnificent sketch Vico has portrayed the beginnings of civilization. Fear of natural elements—elements which were personified by early men who projected their own nature onto the universe—is the origin of the first institutions and customs. Thunder and lightning and other natural calamities forced men to seek secure shelter and simultaneously induced in them fear of the overpowering giants. The primitive construal of the forces of nature in terms of the projection of human traits onto nature—that is, of the animation of nature—is the origin of poetry which coincides with the onset of civilization. The first impulse for the further development of culture comes when early men—in Vico's language, the "giants"—are constrained by necessity to build human habitations. These men, he notes, "gave up the bestial custom of wandering through the great forest of the earth and habituated themselves to the quite contrary custom of remaining settled and hidden for a long time in their caves" (par. 388). From the gradually strengthened rule of human will over the motions of the body derived

the authority of natural law; for, having occupied and remained settled for a long time in the places where they chanced to find themselves at the time of the first thunderbolts, they became the lords of them by occupation and long possession, the source of all dominion and property in the world. These were those "few whom just Jupiter loved" (*pauci quos aequus amavit Iupiter*). . . . But the historical significance of this phrase is that, in the recesses and depth (of the caves), they became the princes of the so-called 'greater gentes' (*gentes maiores*) who counted Jove the first god. These were the ancient noble houses, branching out into many families, of which the first kingdoms and the first cities were formed" (par. 389)

For after the giants had been constrained by nature to become settled they did not remain in their caves but learned how to build huts and dwellings; finally, when they embarked on agriculture, they settled in the most fertile places provided they could find there proper protection.

It is particularly interesting how Vico derives the movement of civilization from the collaboration of external material conditions and the instinctual constitution of men. Although invoking divine providence wherever this movement operates without conscious human design, he nevertheless provides completely unprejudiced explanations which, in principle, coincide frequently with the most up-to-date findings. He lists primarily four factors which, as motor of civilization, emerge from the mentioned collaboration. He calls these the “four causes or, as it were, the four elements of the civil universe, namely, religion, marriage, asylum, and the first agrarian law” (par. 630).

Vico’s theory of mythology may serve here as an illustration of his general approach. As indicated, he regards mythology as an outgrowth of fear of the overwhelming forces of nature. Early men project their own character onto nature; this means that natural forces appear to them from the outset as living beings akin to men—only stronger, more powerful, and more terrifying. Vico’s conception—which shows him to be an ancestor of the anthropological construal of religion by Ludwig Feuerbach—is eminently lucid and well-developed. After having described the character of primitive men he continues:

Of such natures must have been the founders of gentile humanity when, two hundred years after the great flood and after the earth had sufficiently dried up, the sky at last rolled with thunder and flashed with lightning, as could not but follow from this first violent commotion of the air. Thereupon a few giants—who must have been the most robust since they lived dispersed through the forests on the mountain heights where the strongest beasts have their dens—were frightened and alarmed by the immense effect whose cause they did not know, and lifted their eyes and noticed the sky. And because in such a case the nature of the human mind leads it to attribute its own character to the effect, and because at that point their nature was that of men all robust bodily strength who expressed their violent passions by shouting and grumbling, they pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body which in that aspect they called Jove, the first god of the so-called “greater gentes” (*gentes maiores*) who meant to tell them something by the hiss of his bolts and the clap of his thunder (par. 377).

Thus, Vico claims that “in their lawless condition providence gave to savage and brutish men the impulse toward humanity and the creation of cities, by awakening in them a confused sense of divinity which in their ignorance they ascribed to beings unsuited for it; in this manner, fearful of such an imagined divinity, they began to enter into a certain civil order” (par. 178). In another passage Vico expresses

the same thought as follows: "All the things here discussed agree with that golden passage of Lactantius Firmianus on the origins of idolatry: that the first people, simple and rude, invented the gods 'from terror of present power' (*ob terrorem praesentis potentiae*). Thus it was fear which created gods in the world: not fear awakened in men by other men, but fear awakened in men by themselves" (par. 382). Generally, early men "began to follow their natural curiosity which is the daughter of ignorance and the mother of knowledge, and which, opening the mind of man, gives birth to wonder" (par. 377)

If one compares this account of the historical origin of mythology with the simplistic doctrine of priestly deception—a doctrine embraced contemporaneously or a few decades later by the Enlightenment in its dismissal of religion—Vico's accomplishment emerges in its true light. He examined in detail the cultural significance of religion; thus he taught that, among other things, religion also has the function of compensating the masses for the instinctual repression which civilization demands of them. Moreover, Vico regarded myth as a necessary primitive stage of cognition, a stage from which our science developed and which corresponded to an early stage of social development just like our knowledge corresponds to the mental level of modern civilization. "Wherever a people has grown savage in arms so that human laws have no longer any place among it," he wrote, "the only powerful means to tame it is religion" (par. 177). Thus, in contrast to the Enlightenment, Vico teaches that false religions have their origin not in deception or imposture but in a necessary human development.

Before anyone else, Vico consciously and explicitly recognized the analogy between early historical peoples and presently still existing primitive tribes, and also the symmetry between the mental state of primitives and of children, that is, the correspondence between human ontogenesis and phylogenesis. In this context he made important discoveries—one of them being the insight that children and primitives are unable to form "intelligible class concepts of things" and instead proceed (as he says) to create "poetic characters, that is, imaginative class concepts or universals to which, as to certain models or ideal portraits they reduce all the particular species which resembles them" (par. 209). This conception, according to which the early stages of mental development lack in large measure categorical form or structure and thus are marked by a prelogical type of thinking, concurs completely with the findings of modern research, especially with the work of Lévy-Bruhl.

In regard to mythological religion, another major accomplishment resides in the theory whose principle Vico pinpoints in the statement that “the first fables must have contained civil truths and must therefore have been the histories of the first peoples”(par. 198). This statement expresses the conviction that mythological beliefs were not free creations of the mind but rather reflections—albeit distorted—of social reality. If this conception is applied not only to metaphysics and art, as Vico did, but to all forms of ideological consciousness, then we have a historical-philosophical doctrine of far-reaching importance. The mental ideas characteristic of a period derive from a social life process in which nature and men reciprocally interact. Their content—both in the case of the most obscure intuition and of the clearest mode of cognition—is reality or being; everything depends on the recognition of the underlying reality in a given case, a reality reflected even in the darkest cult.

Vico’s interpretation of the fable of Cadmus illustrates his methods. Having settled in the best and most fertile places, the giants developed into the lords of the first civil communities. They founded families and established asylums which the less privileged had to use out of material need. The first agrarian law then solidified property relations, that is, confirmed the lords in their dominion. Thus, in Vico’s words, “the cities were to be born, formed of two groups of men that composed them: the nobles to command, and the plebeians to obey. Hence emerges the matter of political science which is nothing other than the science of commanding and obeying in states ” (par. 629). The giants in their capacity as lords—this means, the archaic Greeks and Romans who glorified themselves as gods—are called “heroes” in Vico’s study.

In his account, Cadmus

first slays the great serpent (that is, he clears the earth of the great ancient forest); then he sows the teeth (a fine metaphor for his plowing the first fields with curved pieces of hard wood before the use of iron was discovered . . .). Next he throws a heavy stone (the hard earth which the clients or *famuli* wished to plow for themselves); from the furrows armed men spring forth (in the heroic contest over the first agrarian law the heroes come forth from their estates to assert their lordship of them, and unite in arms against the plebs, and they fight not among themselves but with the clients that have revolted against them; the furrows signifying the orders or estates in which they unite and thereby give form and stability to the first cities on the basis of arms). And Cadmus is changed into a serpent (signifying the origin of the authority of the aristocratic senates, for . . . with the Greeks it was Draco, the dragon

that wrote the laws in blood) . . . Thus, the myth of Cadmus contains several centuries of poetic history and is a grand example of the inarticulateness with which the still infant world labored to express itself, which is one of the great sources of the difficulties encountered in the explanation of fables (par. 679).²

In the myths and fables, Vico constantly re-encounters the dependence of the plebeians on the patricians, of the *famuli* on the lords—a dependence he compares and identifies with medieval conditions of feudalism and vassalage. The sons may some day be liberated from the familial submission to the monarchical power of the father, and may become fathers themselves; but the servants remain hopelessly unfree. The domination oppressing the slaves engenders unhappiness and finally leads to revolutions. The opposition between classes is thus for Vico the basic social fact, and the key to Greek mythology. The different forms of the misery of slavery find their symbolic expression in the specific sufferings of Tantalus, Ixion, and Sisyphus (pars. 582, 719). These myths recount as many motives of rebellion.

It was not only myth, however, that Vico regarded as reflection of social conditions; he also linked metaphysics with historical reality. In his view, the intelligible class concepts of Socrates and the ideas of Plato were all derived from “the observation that Athenian citizens in their legislative acts united in the uniform idea of an equally distributed, commonly shared utility”; and in discussing Aristotle’s new concept of justice Vico affirms expressly that “such principles of metaphysics, of logic and ethics originated in the Athenian marketplace” (pars. 1040, 1043).

Concerned with the discovery of real connections and “hidden” linkages, this conception of mythology and metaphysics constitutes an immense advance over Hobbes’s bald assertion that false doctrines are free inventions designed to deceive people. In Vico’s perspective, these doctrines are basically distorted manifestations of reality on a lower level of historical development. As little as the state is a freely and consciously created product of human reason—as alleged by teachers of (modern) natural law—just as little can language, art, religion, and metaphysics be traced to a rational origin. Rather, it is the task of science to perceive these cultural products as surface manifestations of history and to grasp the natural-instinctual and social underpinnings from which they emerged and which are reflected in them.

Vico’s interpretations of mythology are prime examples of the attempt to decode “mental” contents or phenomena out of their underlying social conditions. Vico is far removed from trying to

comprehend the process of artistic and religious creation as a conscious or deliberate distortion of an initially unideologically existing reality. The aesthetic images in which the sociologist subsequently detects the reflection of the society of a given epoch, these same images appear from the perspective of their authors as entirely pristine or "originary" inventions. There is no pre-established harmony between the social meaning or value of creative achievements and their underlying individual intention. Creative works gain transparency only in the course of history.

"The human mind is naturally impelled to take delight in uniformity" (par. 204). To be sure, Vico's attempt at a uniform historical explanation is still a far cry from those constructive-speculative syntheses which claim to contain the key not only for the decoding of the past but also for the prediction of the future. From the vantage point of such philosophical-historical systems, history appears like a body permeated by a unified meaning or intention, a meaning that can be logically reconstructed and comprehended in a univocal manner. This kind of structure can be found in the grand system of Hegelian philosophy and also in the simplified scheme of Oswald Spengler, according to which one culture is dominant in a given age, moves through the stages of youth, maturity, and decline in order to be replaced by the next culture. Vico too grants us the satisfaction of a universal panorama of history; his study too allows us to delight in "uniformity." In fact, what Spengler's scheme surely did not intend as idle philosophical speculation, we encounter similarly in Vico's case. In contrast to Spengler, however, Vico clings to the philosophical conviction that despite the "recourse" of older patterns—despite mankind's lapse into barbarism at the end of a cycle—the eventual establishment of a just order of life remains an eternal task. This idea is specially solidified and underscored by the identification of historical regularity and divine providence.

"It is important to view the terms youth, ascent, prime, and decay . . . as objective designations of organic states," we read in the Introduction to Spengler's *Decline of the West*; once we seek "the typical in the changing fortunes of these great individuals (that is, the cultures), the necessity in the immense mass of accidents, we finally perceive the unfolding picture of world history which is peculiar to us as inhabitants of the West, and to us alone."³ Probably under the influence of Machiavelli, Vico long ago invoked such a picture of the unfolding panorama of world history, and he invoked it in a manner which seemed to him natural and which in any case was metaphysically unburdened.

Our science, he observes, “comes to describe also an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall” (par. 349). Since, for Vico, civilization is not the product of free spirit but rather conditioned in its rise and development by material circumstances and their interaction with the nature of primitive men, he is likewise convinced that, wherever society is formed, it must always and everywhere follow necessarily the same historical course—so that it becomes possible to detect the outlines of an “ideal history” governing the path of all civilizations. “Wherever, emerging from savage, fierce, and bestial times,” Vico observes, “men begin to domesticate themselves by religion, they begin, proceed, and end by those stages which are here investigated” (par. 393).

The first or earliest period is governed by giants; the mode of cognition is fantasy, its expression fantastic poetry. The second period—Vico calls it the heroic age—is marked by the emergence of classes and thus of states. The heroes or patricians unite against the plebeians or clients and form armed orders or estates in order to protect property relations and to defend themselves against the propertyless. In these social contests the leaders of the patricians develop into kings. These were the chiefs who “led the fathers in quelling the revolts of the *famuli*,” for “the first cities were ordered entirely in such a manner as to maintain the rule of the nobles or patricians” (pars. 264, 597). The further stages of this “ideal history,” especially the “age of men,” were examined by Vico in less detail. By far the largest portion of the *Scienza nuova* is taken up by the analyses of the poetical and heroic ages. The early kingdom is followed first by an aristocratic then a democratic republic, next by imperial despotism and finally by decline. “The nature of peoples,” we read, “is first crude, then severe, then benign, then delicate, finally dissolute” (par. 242).

Like Machiavelli Vico is convinced that every historical cycle must be followed by a “recourse” or relapse into barbarism and by the beginning of a new cycle. The immediate reason for this conviction about relapse (*ricorsi*) resides for Vico in the evidence of the Middle Ages. The medieval period is to him a new age of heroes, a new barbarism. There are hardly more profound chapters in the *Scienza nuova* than those in which Vico compares the dark cruelty and narrowness of the Middle Ages with those early archaic epochs recorded in classical mythology. This Catholic thinker made bold to assert that the title “sacred royal majesty” and the bestowal of spiritual dignities on medieval princes constituted a repetition of the

self-apotheosis of the heroes of Greek mythologies, ultimately reflecting a recurrence of similar social conditions. Vico offers prime examples of a comparative sociology which (with the sole exception of Voltaire) far exceed all achievements in this field during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Important and impressive is also the insight contained in Vico's method: his manner of treating the scheme of an ideal history not speculatively in the sense of an a priori principle—so, to speak, as a fate decreed from above—but as an outgrowth of empirical causes (for example, the new barbarism as a result of the great tribal migrations). Wherever mankind is returned to its beginnings by such empirical events—be they natural calamities, the invasion of uncivilized tribes, or the anarchical self-destruction of civilized nations—there the whole development must begin anew and take the same course, in accordance with the social regularities which Vico believes to have uncovered in the *Scienza nuova*. He declares in effect that “the course of the institutions of the nations had to be, must now be, and will have to be such as our science demonstrates, even if infinite worlds were born from time to time through eternity, which is certainly not the case” (par. 348).

Vico's theory of recourses, of course, is only a bare belief in the recurrence of human affairs. However, one must grant him at least that the possibility of a relapse into barbarism is never completely excluded. There may be external catastrophes, but also events caused by men themselves. The great tribal migrations may be a thing of the past; yet, under the deceptive veneer of the present we find within civilized states tensions of a kind which may well result in frightening relapses. To be sure, destiny governs human lives only to the degree that society is unable self-consciously to organize and manage its affairs in its own interest. Where philosophy of history still harbors the notion of an obscure but independently and autonomously operative meaning of history—a meaning one seeks to reconstruct in schemata, logical designs, and systems—one must object that there is just as much meaning and reason in the world as men bring to bear and realize in it. To the extent that it is a matter of finding regularities in history whose knowledge may serve as an instrument for such realization, to that extent Vico—this early “interpretive” philosopher of history—must be acknowledged as a pioneering thinker.

Translated by Fred Dallmayr

NOTES

1. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, rev. trans. of 3rd ed. (1744) by Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1968), par. 2 (hereafter *NS*). Horkheimer's citations are from Vico, *Die Neue Wissenschaft über die gemeinschaftliche Natur der Völker* (Munich: n.p., 1924). Occasionally, I have slightly altered the Bergin and Fisch translation in order to stay closer to the text used by Horkheimer.

2. As Horkheimer notes in this footnote: "Vico unhesitatingly interprets Greek myths from the angle of old-Roman conditions. We need not discuss the reason for this here, since we are only interested in the general principle."

3. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. C. F. Atkinson (New York: Knopf, 1926), vol. 1:26. Horkheimer cites Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Munich: n.p., 1920), vol.