CHAPTER 6

The Role of the Individual in History

Biographical and Historical Writing in the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Century

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For a long time, historians believed that their task was to snatch human actions from oblivion.¹ That idea was rooted in an immortal image of Nature – being eternal, natural elements didn’t need memory to continue existing; but human beings, marked by mortality can become almost the same as nature because of History. From this perspective, historical writing ought to focus on the great actions and works of which mortals are capable.²

Things have changed in the last two hundred years. After the end of the eighteenth century, historians put the actions and suffering of individuals on one side to try to discover the invisible process of universal history, ‘that evolutionary movement of our genre, which should be considered as its true content, as its centre and its essence’.³ There are various reasons which led historians to ignore individual human beings and pass from a plural history (die Geschichten) to single history (die Geschichte).⁴ Two difficult surprises of modernity have, without doubt, weighed on this. On one hand, there was the discovery that nature is also mortal and, on the other, the progressive loss of trust in the ability of our senses to grasp the truth.⁵ But, alongside these profound transformations, which go well beyond our conscious attitudes and, for certain aspects, elude us, some less tragic, or even banal, intellectual vicissitudes have perhaps influenced us. First of all, the hope of giving stable and

⁵ On the awareness of the vulnerability of nature, also Hans Jonas, Philosophical Essays. From Ancient Creed to Technological Man (Chicago: The University Chicago Press, 1974).
objective scientific bases to social sciences and humanities. This aspiration mobilized an immense effort across disparate disciplines (from demography to psychology, history, sociology, and more) to highlight uniformity and eliminate idiosyncrasies from humanistic and social scientific models of interpretation and comparison.

This tendency to make the past uniform has had serious consequences. Hannah Arendt spoke about it in a letter dated 4 March 1951 to Karl Jaspers. Returning, once more, to the political and social tragedies of the twentieth century, she wrote that modern thought had lost the taste for difference: ‘What radical evil really is I don’t know, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with the following phenomenon: making human beings as human beings superfluous [...]. This happens as soon as all unpredictability – which, in human beings, is the equivalent of spontaneity – is eliminated.’ Then she clarifies: ‘I suspect that philosophy is not altogether innocent in this fine how-do-you-do. Not, of course, in the sense that Hitler had anything to do with Plato. [...] Instead, perhaps in the sense that Western philosophy has never had a clear concept of what constitutes the political, and couldn’t have one, because it spoke of man the individual and dealt with the fact of plurality tangentially.’

Evidently, in addition to philosophy, loss of plurality also concerned history. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, history books were full of facts without protagonists. They talked about powers, nations, peoples, alliances, and interest groups but only rarely of human beings. As the German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger guessed, the language of history started to hide individuals behind impersonal categories: ‘History is shown without a subject, the people whom history is concerned with only appear as accessory figures, like a scenic background, as a dark mass in the background of the picture. There is talk of “the unemployed” or “businessmen”.’ Even the so-called makers of history appear to be lifeless: ‘The fate of the others – those whose destiny doesn’t make news – is avenged on their luck. They’re stiffened like mannequins and resemble the wooden figures which, in De Chirico’s paintings, take the place of men.’

The ethical and political price of this desertification of the past is very high. As Isaiah Berlin wrote, at the time we discard personal reasons, ‘Alexander,