The Coming of the Iron Age

I

Progress came to the Eastern Mediterranean lands of the Bronze Age, and to other areas as well, as the Iron Age. The new technology must have been brought by the barbarians from the North, wave after wave of Hellenic hordes, who conquered the remnants of the highly civilized Minoan empire and imposed their own rule on the hapless natives. The destructiveness and cruelty of the process is well illustrated by the fate of Troy as depicted in the Iliad. Similarly to Troy, many cultures must have been destroyed, cities razed, temples desecrated, their treasures looted, their priestesses raped. If interpreters of the old myths are to be believed, the coming of the Iron Age was a protracted political revolution as well, in which matriarchal political systems were destroyed and patriarchal ones firmly established in their places. The ancient myths further suggest that this bloody process also brought about irreversible changes in political morality: ancient and well-integrated communes were destroyed, while avaricious and bloodthirsty brigands came into power who brought with them a lupine political morality which did not shrink from the basest deeds. The Greek leaders besieging Troy are described as vicious, greedy and treacherous, base enough to murder their own children for gold or for a woman.

With the coming of the Iron Age, too, the old Bronze Age deities were dethroned and, indeed, according to the myths, physically liquidated, their places usurped by the unsavory gods of the Olympian household, Valhalla and other such abodes—an uncouth lot of quarrelsome, jealous, capricious, murderous lechers, contemptuous of everything once considered holy and grudgingly respectful only of Fate, which at that time was not yet called Historical Necessity. Even in this case their respect was qualified by recurrent notions that they might cheat Fate or twist it to their advantage. Truly the early Hellenes, like the Norsemen, shaped their gods in their own image.

The leaders of these savage hordes, especially those among them who managed to establish new city states and to found dynasties, were themselves elevated to semi-divine status. Called heroes, they became enveloped by myths (which occasionally were rewritten to suit the present rulers’ political purposes); their tombs became places of pilgrimage and worship.

What did it take to become a hero? What were the qualifications which might enable a man to make it into the starry sky as a constellation or to become the subject of epic poems? The myths tell us that they were of divine or at least noble parentage and that they were favored by some god; but they also excelled in physical prowess and in courage, and they were cunning, indeed treacherous, as well as ruthless. Few if any of the monstrous men of iron who usurp power in our present Age of Steel claim to have descended from gods, though some of them have been of noble lineage, and many believe or pretend to have been chosen by Providence or History. Few of them have stood out because of physical feats, though many of them have cashed in on their military service record. But all of them have excelled, like Achilles, Odysseus, and Agamemnon, in trickiness and cruelty. To be numbered among the great, however, these criminals must be successful empire builders, movers of men and material in victorious warfare, effective political change, or ambitious economic construction. They must be changers of cultures and institutions, pioneers of new moralities. Great rulers, Ulam tells us, are those who enslave their own people so that the nation or the realm may be powerful. Great tyrants, he writes, are those who value power over lives. Indeed, those whom our history books call great have been destroyers as much as builders, wrecking cultures and political systems, human happiness and human lives on a vast scale. In order to do this, they also had to be fanatics. The great men of history have usually been, in some sense, mad. And if the great heroes of history are criminals and monsters, technological progress comes in the stomping of the iron heel. This realization is one which Shakespeare and Hegel, among others, shared with the author of the Iliad; and it is one of the reasons why there has been recurrent revulsion against technological progress, and why some writers in the democratic era have preferred a heroless interpretation of history. Many of the judgments I make in this review article are consequences of this conviction.

Marx and Engels, whose work clearly is a product of the democratic age, did subscribe to the idea of progress, even though they knew the price it exacted; but they did not believe in heroes at all, except in the realm of the intellect. Marx admired Aristotle, Spinoza, Balzac, while Engels expressed admiration for the artistic and scientific polymaths of the Renaissance. But for most of the so-called great statesmen of the past they had contempt; and the great revolutionary leaders of the past they viewed, at best, with ambivalence. They would have scoffed at the view of their friend Lavrov, who asserted that history is made by solitary fighting personalities; they probably would have rejected also their own disciple Plekhanov, who, to be sure, regarded great leaders as exponents of social forces, but nonetheless conceded that they might influence individual events and accelerate historical processes. The very term "great leaders" would have offended them. Despite grudging admiration for Münzer, Danton, Napoleon and other revolutionary leaders of the past, they made it very clear that the only revolution corresponding to their own ideals and expectations would be a leaderless revolution, a revolution made by the working class as a self-organized force of class-conscious individuals liberating themselves. As long as there were leaders, they asserted repeatedly, the revolution would fail.

Of course, his protests notwithstanding, Engels did have a hero, whom he served