

THE ORIGINS OF CULTURAL HISTORY

---

3 *The Origins of the Conflict*  
*Political Lawyers, Classical Scholars, Narrative Historians*

*This is a lightly edited transcript of a tape-recording of the third of three Gauss Seminars given by Berlin at Princeton in 1973. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars.*

I RETURN to Vico's attitude to metaphor. Metaphor, simile and other analogies of this kind preoccupied his thoughts in the *Scienza nuova*, to a large degree because he obviously felt himself to be in acute opposition to the whole trend of the age. Broadly speaking, towards the end of the seventeenth century, and even at the beginning of the eighteenth – if authorities such as Professor Abrams are to be trusted, as I am sure they are – metaphor was connected with wild imaginings, with superstitions, dreams, myths, Utopias, with lurid barbarian imaginations, nonsense which filled people's heads and which led to irrationalism and error and persecution.<sup>1</sup> The work of the Royal Society in England was largely directed towards the stamping out of this inaccurate, romantic and ultimately misleading use of language. Thomas Sprat, one of the members of the Royal Society, says very firmly that one of the purposes of the scientific enterprise is to return to a 'close, naked, natural way of speaking', as near to 'Mathematical plainness' as one can.<sup>2</sup> This is very much in the spirit of early twentieth-century positivists, faced with enemies whom they conceived of in roughly the same fashion.

Vico was certainly on the other side. The heart of Vico's doctrine may be summed up in this fashion. In the past, an error

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *TCE*, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

was made, no doubt, by anthropomorphism that is to say, by endowing non-human substances with human attributes, by endowing trees or rivers with properties which properly belong to human beings. But even if anthropomorphism though in some ways very rich and romantic and imaginative, was nevertheless an erroneous way of interpreting the behaviour of objects in the natural world, there was one entity to which anthropomorphism was appropriate, to which it was not wrong to apply it, and that is: men themselves. That is Vico's central point, that it does not follow that, because we are not allowed to attribute human qualities to nature, we must attribute natural qualities to men. There are two extremes which are to be avoided: one is the application of human characteristics to non-human entities, and the other is the insistence that the human world should be treated as if it was part of the non-human world, that is, by the strict application of purely physical, or purely biological, or anyhow purely natural-scientific criteria and categories to human beings, so that we artificially stop ourselves saying things about human beings which in fact we know to be true.

That is the heart of Vico's doctrine. We know that human beings have motives, we know that human beings have purposes, we know that human beings are active, that they strive, that they wish to do certain things, that they move in certain directions, that human history is a history of attempts by human beings to cope with each other and with nature, and that men in that sense are self-transforming – that is, that human beings are as they are because other human beings before them have made efforts to be something or do something of a particular kind, in order to satisfy themselves in the world in which they find themselves, or in order to explain this world to themselves. These explanations and these efforts have so transformed human beings and the world round them that the next generation is in certain respects different, and strives for something else, and so on. But this cannot be fitted into the normal categories of physical or biological interpretation and speculation, and therefore there is a sense in which we know more about what human beings are at than we know about what material objects are at: indeed, we do not know that material objects are at anything at all. Therefore there is an inner knowledge which is to be differentiated, discriminated, from outer knowledge. There is something called human studies, or humane studies, which are to

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

be discriminated from the natural sciences, and there really is a gulf between them.

This is the great issue of *Naturwissenschaft* versus *Geisteswissenschaft*, of the natural sciences versus the humanities, versus the arts, which became a burning question from that day on, and is not dead now. Whether it was a correct discrimination or not, whether it was a proper thing to say or not, has ever since been an enormous bone of contention, which many generations of scholars and philosophers, thinkers, historians – various persons pursuing various disciplines – have not ceased discussing. Vico started that ball rolling, and to that extent one can say that he is an originator of something quite new and very important.

Consider, too, his achievements as a whole. He introduced a new theory of mathematics which was not appreciated at its proper worth – whether it is valid or invalid – until the twentieth century. He initiated a new aesthetic in the sense that he believed that not only the arts, but in general human behaviour, could be interpreted as some kind of expression, not as embellishment of life in a particular way, not as the production of objects in accordance with certain rules, but as in some way the self-expression of individual or collective natures, the attempt to say something or display some kind of attitude towards a picture of the universe, which takes the form of works of art, of religious rites, of legal systems, of literature, of various other manifestations of the human spirit; and therefore that there must be a certain relationship between them which he did not actually call style, but which later thinkers have thought of as being some single pervasive style, in terms of which it is possible to define what in the end has come to be called a culture. Vico is the inventor of the notion of a culture in this sense: not in the sense, simply, of a degree of progress in the arts or the sciences, which it has sometimes been taken to be, nor, again, in the purely anthropological sense, simply of a way of living, whatever it may be, however lowly, however uninteresting, in the sense in which you can say that ants have a culture, or in the sense in which you can speak about a culture of bacteria,<sup>3</sup> in a perfectly proper sense; not in that sense, but in the sense in which a culture represents some kind of unified style in acting, living, expressing oneself, doing things which in some way can be traced all through the

<sup>3</sup> Or of red herrings. Ed.

#### TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

behaviour of a society, even if you do not wish to go too far, but keep in mind the warnings of people such as Ernst Gombrich that you must not apply the iron law of isomorphism, you must not insist that every single manifestation of a culture, or every single manifestation of an age, or every single manifestation of a particular kind of attitude to life must – the word ‘must’ is sinister here – must, is inevitably conditioned to, cannot but, obey some kind of central pattern which it cannot avoid at all, so that people who try to maintain that it is avoidable are unnecessarily led into error. These excesses do of course lead people into Hegelianism, Spenglerism, Toynbeeism and so on, but these are mere exaggerations of a position which Vico was the first to state. In this way he founded the sciences of comparative philology, comparative anthropology, comparative legal studies, comparative everything. The whole notion of all these various comparisons derives from the fact that you are now not simply comparing the law of the Portuguese to the law of the Chinese, or the law of the Romans, perhaps, to the law of the French, but considering law as a manifestation of a general form of life, the part which it plays in a particular society of which you are a member, versus the part which law plays in some other society; and you explain how a system of law comes to be what it is in terms of some functional relationship to other manifestations of the same society. Although this is a platitude by now, it was certainly not so in 1725, when the first edition of the *New Science* appeared and was greeted with a deafening silence.

It was read by scarcely anyone at all. It became a locally famous book in Naples, but it did not really emerge very much outside it, though there were people who read it. One cannot blame people for not reading Vico, either then or later. The chief cause of the fact that Vico is comparatively unread, and easily forgotten, is that he is unreadable. If one attempts to read the *New Science*, one begins with great enthusiasm, but the enormous accumulation of small data, the endless divagations, the excursions, the footnotes, his inability to stop himself pursuing an idea, however irrelevant to some other idea, from which it again exfoliates into something else, and proliferates into something else again, the absolute chaos out of which the whole thing is composed, the fact that there are too many ideas struggling for expression at the same time through the comparatively narrow bottleneck of Vico’s anyhow none too felicitous style – all these things militate against a large degree of

#### TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

popularity for his writings, with the consequence that nobody much read him. Hamann, whom I had occasion to mention in connection with Herder, did, as I say, order the *Scienza nuova* under the impression that it was a book about economics (because in the 1760s, when he ordered it, the ‘scienza nuova’ was physiocratic economics, mainly as written about in France, but also to some degree in Italy). But when he received it – even though Hamann was no one to speak, because he lived very much in a glass house, since his own style is also an absolute model of the obscurest obscurity of which even German is capable – even Hamann was totally incapable of understanding a word, and sent it on to his friend Jacobi, saying that he hoped that he would make a little more of it than he was able to himself.

After Hamann nobody very much saw it, at least not in Germany. There were a few German scholars in Vico’s lifetime who criticised him rather severely and wounded his feelings, and Thomasius may have read him, but nobody else did, as far as we know; at least no one refers to him. Even the great Goethe, when he went to Naples, and was presented with a copy of the *Scienza nuova* by the famous Neapolitan jurist Filangieri, writes in *The Journey to Italy – Die italienische Reise* (this is in 1787) – ‘They gave me a copy of the *Scienza nuova* by Giambattista Vico, which they treat here as a kind of Bible’; and he says it is remarkable ‘what extraordinary visions of the future this man has, what a strange, interesting imagination he displays’.<sup>4</sup> Well, of course there is nothing about the future in Vico, and Goethe neither did read nor could have read the book with any degree of attention; in fact he also sent it on to a friend in Germany, nor can one blame him.

Vico’s fortune was finally made only in the 1790s, when Vincenzo Cuoco, a Neapolitan patriot, disappointed in the Parthenopean Republic founded by Napoleon, came to France and derived from Vico Burkean sentiments about the fact that every culture, every group has a unique development of its own, so that one must not impose uniform forms of law, uniform constitutions, uniform forms of administration upon disparate entities, and the Neapolitans were entitled to a Neapolitan life and not to a Bonapartist French one. Cuoco therefore became a great propagandist for the Italian liberties, not only the liberty of any one part of Italy, but the liberties of all parts of Italy, without

<sup>4</sup> A paraphrase; cf. *TCE*, p. 113.

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

perhaps stressing unification all that much. From Cuoco the torch passed to various other Italian exiles from Napoleon in France, and then in the end the book wandered into the hands of Victor Cousin, who was a very learned man and read virtually everything. Cousin recommended it to Michelet, Michelet read it in the 1820s, and caught fire from it. He thought it was the most marvellous book he had ever read, translated it rather freely into a far more readable version than ever Vico could have dreamt of – it is not accurate but it is extremely eloquent and very fascinating, Michelet's version – and even said, towards the end of his life in the 1860s, 'Vico was the only teacher I had. He was the man who taught me that history is the history of the self-transformation of man, how man transforms himself from whatever he was into whatever he is'<sup>5</sup> – a highly romantic conception of humanity struggling to make itself. That is what he derived from Vico, at any rate, and he said, 'It is strange that the Germans should not have acknowledged his genius. All these marvellously talented men – Niebuhr, Savigny, Wolf – all these people, all their ideas are already teeming in the little pandemonium of the *Scienza nuova*.'<sup>6</sup> Why the Germans did not acknowledge this is another story, which one need not go into. People sometimes are strangely reluctant to confess any debt to their predecessors, and I think this is probably true of Vico himself, as I hope to show.

The question now arises: Where do these ideas come from? At least, where do the central ideas come from? Where does the idea of understanding come from? Or the idea of differences of culture, the whole notion of anachronism, which Vico really put on the map in a very big way, the notion that certain phenomena are attributable only to certain kinds of manifestation of the human spirit, so that if somebody says that Mozart wrote *Die Zauberflöte* at the court of Ghengis Khan, this is not merely a false statement, which of course one knows to be so, but also a statement which indicates some kind of aberration on the part of the person who says it? That is to say, it is not merely false, it is obviously a statement which is in some way mad, irrational, unintelligible. Why is it mad, irrational, unintelligible? Because, you say, the kind of work which *The Magic Flute* is cannot have been written at the court of Montezuma, cannot have been written at the court of

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *TCE*, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *TCE*, p. 117.

#### TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

Ghengis Khan, cannot really have been written at the court of Queen Elizabeth either. And you say: Why not? It is not only because harmony had not made a certain progress or because notes were not put together in quite that way, but because everything which *The Magic Flute* expresses as a work of art obviously belongs to a particular texture of life (what we nowadays call a culture or civilisation) which was very different from another kind of coherent life led by people at the court of Ghengis Khan or the court of Queen Elizabeth, or wherever it might be. This, which seems so obvious and true now, was perhaps not quite so platitudinous in the late seventeenth century, when there was a general tendency to suppose that there was such a thing as human culture in general – progress of the arts and sciences – which the Greeks had brought to a high degree of perfection; then there was this terrible disaster, the dark night of the Christian Middle Ages; then life sprang up again in the Italian Renaissance and people rediscovered the truths which the classics had known but which had been forgotten or perverted by the intermediate generations; then we went on from there and developed things further, but this knowledge, this culture, this attitude were fundamentally one, of a kind, they were fundamentally unitary in character, they were not different from each other. The history of mankind was conceived of simply as ups and downs – some pessimists thought more downs, and optimists thought more ups, but ups and downs more or less within the same sort of framework, not necessarily even teleologically considered, not necessarily even working towards some far-off divine event, or working towards some kind of fulfilment, perhaps just a causal sequence, perhaps just an accumulation by which the enlightened occasionally manage to make little additions to civilisation, to comfort, to art, to pleasure, to ways of living, which other barbarians then proceed to destroy. The idea was of a kind of unidirectional flow. The idea that there are incommensurable cultures, which are each in some sense self-contained, although of course they are part of a general movement, and have certain relations to each other – they are not totally insulated, and can be conceived of as being part of a single history of mankind, but each nevertheless has enough character of its own to make it possible to attribute things to it, so that you can say ‘This is typically fourteenth-century’, ‘This is typically *dix-huitième*’, ‘This is typically Elizabethan’ or whatever it is, ‘This is typically Roman’ – the whole notion of typicality, of being characteristic of,

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

is something which Vico feels very acutely, which he put on the map, probably, in a far more vivid and lasting fashion than anybody at any rate before Herder; and the whole history of scholarship in that sense – not simply the history of the actual inductive learning whereby these things are established by scientific means, but the growth of a general feel for what belongs where, of the notion of belonging in general – is something for which these two thinkers seem to me largely responsible.

Now the question arises: Where does this notion of the multiplicity, or at least non-unity, of cultures come from? It is very difficult to say. The one thing which is absolutely clear is that none of the Italian commentators on Vico tells us. Fausto Nicolini was the man appointed by Croce (who re-invented Vico in the twentieth century, certainly) to look after his affairs, and he wrote an immense number of works about Vico, including his splendid edition of the *Scienza nuova*, a two-volume commentary in which every single word and name and subject ever mentioned by Vico anywhere is extensively not only commented upon but cross-referenced and generally speaking editorially looked after in the most careful fashion. Not only Nicolini, who wrote some five or six books on Vico alone, and a great many books and essays around him, and who is, I suppose, the principle Vichian scholar, but also other Italian Vico scholars – Professor Corsano, Professor Fass, Croce himself, Professor Badaloni (I can mention lots of other names) – all these persons failed to give a very convincing account of where it all came from.

Of course there are the four great authors whom Vico talks about, there are Plato and Tacitus and Bacon and Grotius. There are certain parallels in what Vico says, you can trace certain ideas, but not this central idea of the multiplicity of cultures, not the central idea of a special faculty needed for the purpose of entering into, identifying yourself with, knowing what it must have been like to have been – whatever it might be, a red Indian, or a Roman, or a Greek, or a Judaeen. Not that.

What *has* been said? The Latin authors whom he mentions have been ransacked; such names as he gives have been looked at; but in none of the commentaries do we really find anything very convincing. People have spoken about travel as being the great phenomenon of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which widened the mind of Europeans into knowledge of various (from their point of view) exotic peoples both in the East and in the

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

West, both in the western hemisphere and in various parts of Asia and even on the edges of Africa. This is of course perfectly true, and the abbé de Lafitau did write a famous work in the early eighteenth century comparing the American Indians to persons in Homeric Greece, and that sort of thing, and drew quite interesting parallels, but the reference to travel literature and to these exotic peoples in Vico is much smaller than it is in any other contemporary author. If you compare him not merely to Montesquieu but to almost anybody else writing this sort of thing, you will see that Vico leans upon this comparatively little. There are about a dozen references, perhaps, perhaps a few more, but nothing very much if this is to be regarded as a major source.

There is another thing to be said about this which may not be valid, and that is this. The main interest in examining natives, Huron Indians or Siamese or whatever it may be, on the part of the various travellers in the late seventeenth century, and also in literature about imaginary creatures, not only as in Defoe or Swift, but in the famous work called *History of the Sévarambes*,<sup>7</sup> and in other French writings about various imagined peoples, is not I think to trace some kind of parallel culture among them, something which is comparable to our own, but, on the contrary, to establish that these people are perhaps what we once were, that is to say, these people are natural man, untouched, perhaps, by the vices and corruption of civilisation, or perhaps not touched by our religion, but touched by some natural religion of their own. They are usually used as examples of pure natural law, free both from the light of revelation and from the decadence and corruption which our sins have brought upon us.

That is one way of using these people. Alternatively, sometimes by the less sympathetic authors, both in the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth, they are regarded as the debris of mankind, unsuccessful experiments by God, people who were meant to become fully grown human beings, but have turned into a lot of gibbering degenerates; that is certainly Maistre's view of Red

<sup>7</sup> Denis Vairasse, *Histoire des Sévarambes ...* (1677–9). [The book has a complicated publishing history. It first appeared, in part and pseudonymously, in English as *The History of the Sevarites or Sevarambi ...* (London, 1675), by Captain Siden (an anagram of 'Denis'; the preface, ostensibly by the publisher, is signed 'D.V.'). A second part, not by Vairasse, appeared in English in 1679. The dates given after the French title are those of the first French edition, also pseudonymous.

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

Indians, for example, and that of some other eighteenth-century authors as well. But in either case they are used simply as examples of the success or failure, mainly the success, of what might be called uncontaminated natural law; therefore they are not really cultures, they are simply, as it were, innocent childlike human nature, the pure innocence of man untampered with by later influences. What they are not represented as is rival civilisations having their own values, which are of a certain interest to us, which can be compared to our values, either for better or for worse, which are wholly different from them, and which can be regarded as something seriously to contrast our values with, not in an ironical way, in which, for example, the Persians are brought in by Montesquieu, or the Huron Indian is brought in by Voltaire in *L'Ingénue*. Therefore I do not believe that travel literature is the answer here; at least it is not anything like a complete answer.

Then there is Professor Fisch, a very admirable editor of Vico, who produced and edited the excellent English translation published by Cornell University. He says that one of the things which happened was that, as a result of the Reformation, monasteries were opened, texts appeared which had not appeared before, the Roman Church was under attack by Protestants, particularly under historical attack by people who tried to prove that early Christianity was very different from what it had been made out to be by the papacy; that they had to defend themselves, also by historical means, against these historical attacks – hence the Maurists and the Bollandists and all the various defenders of the Church by historical means – and that therefore this in some way stimulated an interest in history; all of which is perfectly true. But again it fails to explain the particular Vichian contribution – not just interest in the past, or interest in history, but the notion of many cultures as opposed to one culture. It is this whose source I am trying to identify.

Again, there is a very elaborate work by a very learned man called Nicola Badaloni, who examines, quite properly, the intellectual atmosphere of Naples in Vico's time, which is of course the first thing one ought to do. But he also reaches conclusions which appear to me to be somewhat unpalatable. It is an immensely learned work, and you really do learn from it a very great deal about what was happening in Naples, particularly in the sciences. He points out that, by contrast with Cartesianism in France, and Cartesianism in Italy too, there was a great deal of

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

experimental science in Naples. There was a man called Bishop Caramuel, and there was a place called the Accademia degli Investiganti, where these people performed experiments. They were much more empirically minded, they were not a priori minded, they did not deduce things from some kind of simple and distinct ideas which the intellect received in an irrefutable manner, they believed in probability rather than certainty – all of which is no doubt very true. Badaloni points out that various thinkers had then made remarks about myths which are not unlike those which Vico made, that there was a good deal of irreligion at the time, there was a good deal of scepticism about certain Christian sources. If you want to know about the general intellectual atmosphere of Naples in the middle and at the end of the eighteenth century, Badaloni really can tell you; and he explains about Campanella, and he explains about the influence of Ficino, and he talks about the influence of a doctor called Sanchez; and all this is genuinely interesting as a piece of the history of science and the history of the intellect in general. But his thesis about Vico is this. Just as these *investiganti* had managed to avoid Cartesian dogmatism and Cartesian apriorism – their attitude towards nature was that all you could obtain were results of a high degree of probability resting upon empirical experiments which could never lead you to complete logical certainty – just in this sort of way this kind of probabilism is what Vico applied to human affairs. Therefore he was really in line with the theory of the unity of practice in natural and humane studies, which ultimately emerges into Hegel and Marx (that is the general purpose of Badaloni's book); and in particular Vico rejected Cartesian apriorism as being a piece of inapplicable intellectualism, and was prone towards something more flexible, something more liable to correction by experience, something more empirical – in fact, for Badaloni, something much more scientific and progressive and promising.

To this I wish to make the following reply. To begin with, Vico was not very interested in science: he was in this respect a reactionary. He mentions Galileo, but he has no idea that Galileo had made a genuine revolution in his subject. His general attitude is of a man brought up by pious priests, who looks with suspicion, not to say horror, upon the advance of materialistic science as a considerable danger to the world in which he lives, which is the world of Christian antiquities, Roman antiquities, eloquence, humanities, the law.

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

This is somewhat impressionist, and by no means an argument. A stronger argument is this. It is true that Vico does not draw the line between what might be called true knowledge and inferior forms of knowledge where Descartes draws it, that is to say, between the a priori truths of mathematics, or of things to which mathematics can be applied, and the rest; but the whole originality of Vico, such as it is, the whole burden of Vico's sermon, is to say that we know human history ourselves in a way different from that in which we know nature. He may be right or he may be wrong about this, but this is his thesis, that we have a special understanding of ourselves because we understand what we make, in this case history, in a way in which we do not understand what we do not make, in this case nature. So there is a gulf between the two. But this gulf is different from Descartes' gulf. Descartes' gulf lies between the a priori and the a posteriori. Vico's gulf is quite different. Vico's gulf is between *Geisteswissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft*, between knowledge of man and knowledge of nature, but it is a gulf, it is not monism. If all that Vico was saying were that our knowledge of history can never attain to much more than probability, even as the sciences, according to Bishop Caramuel, let us say, could not, then he would be producing an enormous platitude; very few people in the course of history have doubted that historical statements do not possess the irrefutable certainty of an algebraical truth. If Vico had come out with that, he would have come out with a glimpse of the most enormously obvious truth that ever was stated by man, and we should not now be interested in his writings, and nobody would ever have written those volumes about him which even Badaloni has in fact written. Therefore it cannot be that in which Vico's originality lies. If it lies anywhere, as I say, it lies in the gulf which he drew, rightly or wrongly, between human science and natural science, which has had such an extraordinary career since then.

If this is true, then the probabilism of Neapolitan science in the seventeenth century has nothing to do with it, nothing at all, because Vico thought the opposite. He thought that knowledge of nature was always condemned to being merely probable, because what did we know about nature? We knew about nature only that certain things happened after certain other things, we knew only that certain things happen next door to other things. In the end he was a Humean in that respect before Hume, or a Hobbesian after Hobbes; that is to say, he believed that in the case of nature we

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

simply elaborate general propositions about the likely behaviour of the universe around us; and these propositions might be subordinated to still more general propositions about the behaviour of still simpler entities of which the more complex entities were compounded; that he believed, and that everyone believed. But he thought that we knew rather more about human beings; there we could trace something which we cannot trace in nature, which is, so to speak, the relationships of the inner life. The relationship between a man's ambition for something and its fulfilment is to him something quite different from the relationship of, let us say, a glass of water and a piece of paper which it makes wet. The relationship of two physical substances just has to be taken for granted on the basis of observation. You observe that substance A and substance B, if placed together, if placed next door to each other, produce the following effect, or are followed at any rate by the following phenomena, and this you can then subsume under wide general laws of what in general happens to something of kind X if placed against something of kind Y, and functional laws about the more X the more Y, or the less X the more Y, or whatever it may be. The whole body of science then becomes an enormous concatenation of the interrelationships of these things. But you cannot pretend to understand it, there is no understanding involved, all you can have is knowledge and guesswork – verified or falsified – and ultimately a body of knowledge. In the case of the inner life, at least according to Vico, you understand why human beings behave because you understand what a purpose is, you understand what a motive is, and therefore explanation in that sense, of answering the question 'Why did you do it?', can be provided. Why do trees grow? We do not know. Why is glass harder than paper? We do not know why. We know that it is, and we know how it is, but why it is, who made it so, or whether anyone has, what it intends by doing it, what glass is at, what paper is at, those are the questions which we cannot ask, because in fact we do not think they are at anything. Even if they were at something, we should not know it. In the case of human beings we can say why, and we can say why because there is some kind of inner continuity which we are aware of, in ourselves by introspection, and in the past by this mysterious capacity of being able to enter into the imaginations of those early peoples, though what entering is he does not explain, and this remains a problem for us still.

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

The amount of progress made in the philosophy of history towards establishing how it is, ultimately, that we can claim to be objective about knowing what it would be like to have been an ancient Roman – not simply what we think we should have done had we been there, which is quite a different question, but what we should have done if someone very unlike us had been there, into whose skin, in some mysterious way, we are able to enter – the amount of contribution which has been made by modern thought to this question is comparatively exiguous, but at any rate it is a question which has been both put, and put very pointedly, by Vico. Therefore Badaloni's enormous volume does appear to me to rest on a mistake and not to illuminate where Vico drew his idea from. It is, as I say, intrinsically improbable that he had the faintest interest in Bishop Caramuel, but even if he did it would not have helped him much.

So we are left with the old question: Where did it all come from? Perhaps it does not come from anywhere. Again, it is perfectly possible to say: Men are sometimes original, sometimes they think of things for the first time, there is no need to assume that everything which anyone has thought he must have cribbed from somewhere, or even that all knowledge is necessarily the putting together of pre-existent elements. This is a very crude physical theory of the conservation of intellectual matter, which never gets lost – you simply get atomised little bits, and all that happens is endless recombinations of it. In fact this is an ancient Greek theory, but Vico was not obliged to accept it, because the notion of creation, making something out of nothing, is a Judaeo-Christian notion which he fully accepted and indeed uses in the most fruitful possible way, because he is always talking about creation: that is what expression is, that is what art is, that is what religion is, that is what all these things are which he is discussing. In the classical world there is some suspicion that nothing is ever created, everything is merely recombined and recomposed, but I do not wish to enter into these deep waters.

So we have to ask ourselves: Where does it all come from? Perhaps it does not come from anywhere, but perhaps it does come from somewhere. All the same, we are obliged to ask the question, even if we do not give the answer. All I can say is, where there are so many theories, perhaps it does no harm to offer another one. But first there is one other thing which I wish to say, and that is, not only must one explain where some of it at any rate

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

comes from, but also why this should not have been said, or should not have been said as loudly as it might have been said.

I am certainly not the first person to advance the hypothesis I am about to advance; it comes from some admirable books about Renaissance legal scholarship written by Donald Kelly and George Huppert and J. G. A. Pocock, who are the secondary authorities upon whom I heavily lean, for I cannot for one single moment pretend that I am either a Renaissance scholar at all, or a scholar of Renaissance law in particular, and therefore I have to lean on secondary authorities. But for these purposes they seem to me to be not wholly inadequate.

In the fifteenth century, everyone knows, a phenomenon occurred normally known as the Italian Renaissance. I know that people say that it is an illusion, and that it really began in the thirteenth century or the eleventh century, or it did not begin at all, but was a very gradual period of accumulation which it is a historical illusion to regard as having occurred towards the end of the fourteenth or at the beginning of the fifteenth century. However, leaving that aside, clearly something occurred in the fifteenth century which attracted attention, and part of it was the great burst of interest in classical scholarship on the part of Italian scholars, particularly grammarians, philologists and more particularly Lorenzo Valla. Lorenzo Valla, who wrote in the second third of the fifteenth century, was by nature, as I say, a grammarian and a philologist, and what he wanted to do, and I think some of his contemporaries too, was to rescue the ancient classical texts from what they regarded as the patina of the ages, the perversions, the interpolations, the distortions – all these various terrible things which had been done to them in the Middle Ages – in order to restore them to their pristine purity, for various reasons. Partly because they were literary scholars fascinated by masterpieces, which is a perfectly sufficient explanation for scholarship in any case. Partly because they were grammarians and philologists by nature, and were interested in the vagaries of language, and what had happened to the Latin language, particularly in its relation to Italian. But also, and this has to be stressed, because a good many of them thought that what these classical authors said was true, and what the medieval authors said was on the whole false. That is to say, there were certain great truths discovered by the great philosophers of antiquity, great architectural truths by the architects of antiquity, great legal truths

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

by people who believed in natural law, let us say Aristotle and the Stoics and Seneca and the like, and great truths which the great Roman lawyers had enunciated, all of which had become lost or perverted as a result of the distorting activity of the monks, the hateful monks of the Middle Ages, against whom these persons had set their faces. It was a strictly secular movement, and one of the things which Valla and his successors, particularly in the South of France, particularly the great legal schools, in Turin and in Valence and in Bourges and elsewhere, had set themselves to was the cleaning up of these texts. The great text which was particularly in need of restoration was the text of Justinian's Digest, which was restored not only in the sense that it was extracted from underneath what were regarded as the monstrous interpolations and perversions of the Accursianists and the Bartolists and the Baldists and all the other terrible medieval interpreters; not only that, but far worse, it was discovered that the great editor Tribonian, editor of Justinian's Digest, was himself not only not without fault, but one of the most abominable editors who could ever have lived, that he lumped together and squashed into a kind of single whole the pronouncements of Roman jurists of various ages without attributing them to the specific jurists; Gaius and Papinian and Ulpian had been thrown into one vast pudding by Tribonian, and this also needed restoring, reconstituting. So Tribonian was taken to pieces, and some of his texts were restored to Ulpian, and some to Scaevola, and some to Gaius; the texts were properly chronologically attributed, philology was brought into play, the actual styles of these writers were brought in, and a great cleansing operation then began to occur. Valla went further than this and said that words must be understood as the people used them, not as philosophers used them, that all kinds of monstrosities had been bred by philosophers which had blinded men's vision. Aristotle had talked about being *qua* being. There was no such thing as being, being was an adjective, there was no such noun, there was no such substance. Aristotle also talked about entities. There is no such thing as *entitas*, it is a Roman monstrosity; *ens* is a very poor sort of adjective, and *entitas* does not exist at all; and if you eliminate all these *voces nihili*, all these words which mean nothing at all, then you might get some kind of vision of what these people are really talking about. The first thing to do is to clear away, on the one hand metaphysicians, on the other hand theologians; when you have done that, there is some chance

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

of progress. This is the original proto-Voltairean move towards the purification of texts and the recovery of sanity and wisdom.

The great lawyer Cujas in the South of France proceeded to do immense pioneering work on the Roman law. His various pupils, people such as Hotman and Baudouin, had done so too; there was a great deal of work done on this. One of the motives for this was not wholly disinterested: that is, by the time that the Reformation came along in the sixteenth century, political motives began to get mingled into purely scholarly ones. If you were a reformer or a Huguenot you had a certain natural interest in trying to demonstrate that the texts quoted by the papalists did not have the force which these papalists attributed to them. If you were defending the rights of a university, or some province, or some *parlement*, or some local commune, against the centralising authority of, let us say, the king, you had some desire to prove that the Roman texts which this king and his lawyers used, or the Roman texts which the Pope used, did not have the power and the force and the authority which these men claimed for them. Therefore there began to grow a movement which is particularly evident in Huguenot jurists, such as, for example, Hotman or Baudouin during his Huguenot period (because he ultimately recanted and became a faithful Catholic again), where the contrast between what the Roman law says and what we believe becomes fairly evident. In the great legal centres of Toulouse and Bourges and Valence and Turin much work on these lines was done.

How was it done? The first problem that arose was: What do the Roman lawyers actually mean? Do they mean what these hirelings of the Pope say they mean? Do they mean what the people in Paris who are trying to defend royalist authority say they mean? In the first place, the very process of the faithful reconstruction of any form of human communication requires a certain correct understanding of the meaning of what is said: that is what Valla meant by trying to get rid of the theologians and the metaphysicians. This entails some knowledge of the character and the intentions of the people whose language is being studied, especially of the social structure within which these communications take place. If you are talking about manumission, you want to know what the position was of slaves and owners; if you are talking about other forms of property law, you wish to know about the social structure within which this property occurred – you want to know about the milieu and the period, and

#### TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

the conventions which governed both the words and the lives and the actual practices of the people concerned, because it is only in terms of a particular society that a particular phraseology, legal, moral, religious, literary, liturgical, or based in some custom, has any meaning. The result is that these investigations compel the investigators to go beyond the specific object examined, beyond the legal formula, to the habits and the purposes of the people among whom these legal formulae occur, whom the laws govern, from liturgical phrases to religious rites, to beliefs about cosmology, to beliefs about God's government on earth, to beliefs about geography, to beliefs about social and economic life and the like. This of course may require the investigation of various origins, of the genesis and the evolution of this or that custom, this or that law, and this involves the investigator, who may have no such ideas in his head at all – involves him willy-nilly in a certain amount of social history, a certain amount of historical anthropology or historical sociology or whatever you wish to call it.

This need to attempt reconstruction acts as a powerful stimulus not only to history, but to what might be called a historicist attitude, to looking for the answers to legal or theological or political questions in social growth, in the interplay of a variety of social factors in determining the meaning of this or that particular set of symbols, of this or that institution, as Vico said: when men's ends and way of life are 'thus and so, such and not otherwise are the institutions that come into being'.<sup>8</sup> This you have to trace, and the tracing of the 'thus and not otherwise' is genetic. This genetic tracing involved these people in becoming, willy-nilly, reconstructors of the past by non-narrative methods, and they became rivals, without knowing it, of the narrative historians whose findings were exposed to such fearful scepticism on the part of the Pyrrhonists whom I referred to earlier. This was because their data seemed much more solid. You now had coins, you had medals, you had papal bulls, you had reports of legal decrees and decisions, you had all sorts of *realia*: you had statues, you had bits of architecture, you had things written on stone – all kinds of things which appeared much more solid than the gossipy accounts of this or that courtier, this or that historian, this or that corrupt individual, swayed, as I said, by, anyhow, alleged winds of bias this way or that way, either

<sup>8</sup> NS 147. cf. *TCE*, p. 152.

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

vain, or corrupt, or ignorant, or stupid, or malevolent, or whatever it might be. Stones could not lie; legal documents were likely to be much more secure. It was pointed out by Patrizi that even legal documents, even statues, coins, medals – all these excellent *realia* – could be interpreted in all kinds of ways: they did not actually tell their own story. But still there was a feeling, and a quite natural feeling, that there was something more solid here. It was very difficult to maintain that the medal did not say what it said; it was very difficult to say that a thing did not belong to the period to which it quite plainly did belong, and so on; and so a solid basis was automatically created for the reconstruction of the past, simply from the desire on the part of various jurists to know what various words meant, either for the purpose of pure scholarship or for the purposes of political propaganda, or political action – in order to prove to the king that he was wrong, or to prove that the papal interpreters were perverting the facts.

That is one thing. Another thing which happened was rather different. These same Huguenots and these same reformers began to lean upon their own specific geographical past as against that of Rome. There always had been a tendency to say: We are not Romans; we in France, we are Franks, that is why we are called that. It is true that there was a doctrine that they were called Franks only because there was a man called Francus who emerged from Troy, but this doctrine had already become discredited by the sixteenth century, although a man who actually denied that there was a man called Francus and said that the French had in fact come from France, that is, from Franconia, was put in jail in 1715; but that is another story. Eighteenth-century politics is a very peculiar story in that respect, but do not let me delay myself over that now. By the sixteenth century a somewhat more enlightened attitude prevailed. That being so, the notion of *consuetudines*, the notion that there were certain customs of, let us say, the Franks, who arrived in France during the Dark Ages, or certain Gallo-Roman customs which are quite different from the customs of Rome itself, the notion that there were certain local customs which perhaps ought to take precedence over the great centralised body of Roman law, began to rear its hideous head. This is what then began to be opposed to the centralising force of Roman law, whether used by the Pope, or used by the King, or used by the King against the Pope, by the Pope against the King, or by either against local institutions such as parliaments, or local authorities of

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

various kinds, or communes, or feudal lords and other persons claiming feudal rights. That is when you get the tendency to say: It is all very well about Rome, but what is Rome to us?

This begins quite early in the sixteenth century. There is a kind of revolt against Rome. In England this did not occur with any degree of strength because Roman law had never been accepted in England, and therefore the idea of immemorial custom, the idea of common law, the idea of customary law as expounded by people in the seventeenth century, by Cook, by Matthew Hale and so on, was received on far more grateful, far less contentious ground, because there was not the terrible front of the great force of Roman law to be confuted. But in countries where Roman law really had made a certain impression, where it was officially accepted, this was a fairly revolutionary doctrine. We are told that people such as Hotman and Baudouin, the great French jurists, people such as Erik Sparre in Sweden and Pietro de Gregorio in Sicily and François Vranck in the Low Countries, were in considerable physical danger as a result of the new doctrine which they enunciated, which roughly came to saying: There is such a thing as immemorial law here; this law is customary law, it is traditional law, it is something which suits us, it is something which has grown into our particular tradition; it was not made by men, and it cannot be unmade by men. It goes into the dark impenetrable origins of our societies, and the fact that the Romans may or may not have been here, their law may or may not have been imposed upon us, is neither here nor there. We are Swedes, we are Dutchmen, we are Sicilians, we are Frenchmen, we are not Romans of the third century AD, and there is no reason for supposing that Roman law has any particular application to us.

As I say, the chief motive for this, even in England, but certainly in these other countries, was political, that is to say, an attempt to establish localism of some sort, resistance to the centralising power, desire to establish some kind of authority for some kind of local or personal or regional or politically separable liberties of various sorts, just as happened afterwards in the eighteenth century when people like Montesquieu and Boulainvilliers were also arguing in favour of the Frankish invasion, citing the importance of the fact that we, the French nobility, are descendants of the Franks and must have special privileges against the crown – a position which Voltaire mocked so very successfully.

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

This is how the movement developed. Hotman, for example – who was, as I say, an anti-Roman jurist of the middle of the sixteenth century – wrote a book called *Francogallia*, which is a great defence of the fact that we are Franks here, and not Italians. The Franks came out of the German woods in order to rescue the poor Gauls from the horrible yoke imposed upon them by the beastly Romans (that was the doctrine), and rescued them, by God, and made a nation of them, and that is why the Franks and the Gauls have a natural sympathy and symbiosis with each other, whereas the Romans are just old oppressors, fortunately thrown out by these lovers of liberty who come out of these dark woods. That was Hotman's original Germanistic thesis. Hotman quotes Burgundian law, he quotes various Flandrian sources, and so forth, for these purposes. He declares: Every people has its seasons, its changes, its particular morality, its particular *mœurs*, each has its own 'complexion and humour', its own complexion and flavour.<sup>9</sup> Each has a specific territory of its own. There is no timeless wisdom here. Justinian's Codex has nothing to do with us. We propose to take what seems relevant to us. Roman magistrates are no use to us.

Bodin, who is an equally important lawyer of the time, ransacks everything, diplomatic history, monuments, papal bulls, legends, myths, fables, every possible source, in his enormous works, not so much for the purpose of proving that things are different in different countries from what they are with us, but just to see how people succeeded and how they failed, in order that he might apply the result of this to us in a utilitarian spirit. But Bodin too discovers that there are all kinds of extraordinary things which happen which are non-Roman in character, and there is absolutely no reason why Roman law should have any particular relevance to us. Perhaps we should draw wisdom from somewhere else. The jurist Baudouin says: Law and universal history are 'undivided ... limbs of one body and cannot and should not be sundered from one another'.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, law and universal history are one, and we cannot understand law unless we understand history, and we cannot understand history unless we understand law. Is the condition of the Church made clear unless we also give an account

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *TCE*, p. 159.

<sup>10</sup> 'Unius corporis indivisae partes aut membra divelli neque possunt neque debent.' Cf. *TCE*, p. 155 note 5.

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

of the commonwealth in whose bosom the Church is nourished? Is the body of the commonwealth well enough described if one does not know the Church which is its spirit and wrapped in it?

I shall live to see a universal history assembled [he wrote in about 1574], sacred and civil, old and new, our own and foreign; then, out of these two bodies, these two *corpora*, out of history, out of jurisprudence, I should like one single volume to be made. I have not yet been able to decide whether history derives more light from books of jurisprudence, or, on the contrary, jurisprudence from the monuments of history.<sup>11</sup>

There must be one culture, and it is a historical culture at that. In an even more Vichian manner he says: ‘Men are not mere spectators of life, men are judges and interpreters of it’<sup>12</sup> – *iudex vel interpres* of life; and *res humanae*, which a man can interpret, and which a man can judge, are therefore quite different from *res naturales*. The observer is one thing, the performer is another, and if we are to judge what is best done in our circumstances we must look upon our past history, we must look upon our past laws, not simply as facts, but as human lives lived under certain conditions, in response to certain kinds of needs, and criticise them in terms of how far these responses were successful, and then mould our lives accordingly. This is a straight piece of genetic historicism.

This is so far as the lawyers are concerned – this is Hotman, this is Baudouin, and this is Bodin too. Bodin is sometimes regarded as a real anticipator of Vico because he thinks that myths and fables give one information about past customs, and so he does; and he also talks about *vestigia linguae*, about traces of old languages, but he is not Vico. All he does is to trace each modern idiom to some ancient idiom, and points out that, let us say, the word *urbs* comes from the word *orbs* or *orbis* because of the curved walls of a city; or that the word *hostis* originally meant ‘guest’ and then meant ‘stranger’ and then meant ‘enemy’; all of which may be true, but he does not then trouble to trace the actual evolution of this concept, how it grew or altered under the pressure of particular forms of life, which is what Vico does. Vico genuinely goes into the subject of the difference between a poetry-producing

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *TCE*, p. 155, note 4.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *TCE*, p. 161, note 4.

#### TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

culture and a prose-producing culture, between a culture, for example, where you have severe poetry and oligarchy, as opposed to a culture where you have laws, prose, arguments, philosophers, democracy and destruction – which is in fact his great anti-democratic sermon. That is not to be found anywhere in the sixteenth century.

So much for lawyers. Historians in the sixteenth century did equally well, except that it is perhaps less likely that they are sources for Vico. For example, Louis Le Roy in *De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l'univers* in 1575 said that there are many cultures: there is Egyptian culture and Assyrian culture and Persian culture, and Greek, and Roman. *Civilité* he talks about, he talks about *mœurs* (he does not of course call it 'culture'), and he says that all these gifts go together. For example, where philosophy is good, as a rule, he thinks mathematics must be rather good; medicine goes with music, poetry goes with painting, architecture goes with sculpture, warfare goes with other things – eloquence, let us say. When do these things happen? They happen, as you might suppose, when intelligent men are favoured, when intellectuals are put into powerful and important positions. We may question his hypothesis, but at any rate his explanation is less important than that he supposes that there are all these cultures, and he talks about the Arabs, he talks about Turks, Mongols, Indians, Russians, Abyssinians, Spaniards, Lithuanians, Poles, Hungarians – absolutely everybody. But he is still looking for nuggets of the kind of civilisation we approve of in 1575, now. He is still not completely free of the idea that there is one human culture, and you look for traces of it here, there and everywhere. He does not think that these are independent growths, to be seen as such, but he gets very near it, and he does say that every nation has its own particular singularities, its own particular forms of life – its own particular 'graces'. 'Chacun nation a ses graces et ses singularités particulières.'<sup>13</sup> Each nation has its own character. He also says that everything in the world passes: languages, like all things, have 'their beginnings, progress, corruption, end'.<sup>14</sup> This is very like Vico, where language is a symptom of culture in general; and in Le Roy something of the same sort is present.

<sup>13</sup> ref.?

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *TCE*, p. 155, note 7.

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

So Pasquier in 1560, in *Recherche de la France*, says that Rome and France are each a civilisation, but they are not the same. Our administration has nothing in common with theirs; Roman magistrates do not exist here, we do not have plebeians, why should we study Roman history? Why should we build buildings in the Roman style? True, the Louvre is really quite a nice building, although it is built in a more or less neoclassical style, but our style is just as good if not better; the idea of copying Rome is ridiculous. Erasmus comes to his aid and says: Cicero would have laughed at our modern Ciceronians; if you want to be like Cicero you must not imitate Cicero. You must be original like Cicero, practice your own style as well as Cicero, and Cicero would have admired you; imitate Cicero and Cicero would mock you. This is a new note which would not have pleased Valla, for example, would not have pleased those Renaissance scholars who really believed that some kind of eternal truths were buried among the ancients, and if only we could dig them out and live in their light, perhaps everything would be all right after all – which is the general view that there is some kind of single, unvarying, universal truth, and that the ancients possessed it and the Middle Ages lost it; and that is quite a different doctrine.

La Popelinière, who wrote a book called *The Idea of a Perfect History*, complained that the ancient historians do not tell us enough about Greek *moeurs* or *la police des grecs* – Greek polite civilisation, that means, Greek polish, the polished life of the Greeks – about the *façons de faire* of a people, the way in which they lived, their *forme de vivre*. He says: All we can discover about early peoples comes to us through their poetry, because poets are after all the first historians. That is something which Vico could certainly have said. Even though Bodin's interest is purely practical – how could we use this or that technique which we find among the Portuguese or the Chinese or whoever it might be? – yet he too actually adds to the sum of knowledge. But people such as Vignier or Pasquier, for example, or La Popelinière, are genuinely disinterested, they are genuine historians. Pasquier, for example, points out that it is no good attributing everything to physical causes. After all, Greece once upon a time produced marvellous men of genius and is now a wretched country full of nothing but worthless peasants. Africa produced some of the greatest and most learned Christian doctors and saints, and now? (This is 1560.) Germany, once a dreadful country of barbarians

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

roaming in the woods, is now a civilised and splendid country, full of arts and sciences, much to be envied.

France for these people is not a race, and it is not a State; it is rather like what Rome was to jurists like Cujas and Alciati: it is a language, a style and a culture. If one knows the way of life of a people, one can conjecture what its laws are; statutes and ordinances are a clear mirror of a nation's character, said one of them; that is why natural law is no good – this is Pasquier again. Natural law is no good because the only natural law we know is self-preservation; that is true of all men everywhere, but it is not enough. We cannot explain human conduct simply in terms of one general principle. What we have to know are the particular principles which apply in particular circumstances, at particular times, to particular people, and then we have some inkling of what the world is like, what human beings are like, what life is like, and what we ourselves ought perhaps, in our particular circumstances, to be doing.

Let me explain what the consequences of this attitude are – and it is very well stated by Pocock, on whom I am leaning heavily. The first proposition is that the reconstruction of the past by non-narrative historians led to a new kind of history, and renewed interest in the past; it produced a history which is a rival of narrative history and put it on the map again. The second thing which happened was acute disappointment on the part of the neoclassicists because Rome was not to be a homecoming. Valla's idea, the idea of the early Renaissance scholars in Italy, was: We have been wandering too long in these terrible dark woods, into which we have been pushed by these ignorant and wicked priests and monks. At last the sun will shine upon us again; we have come home to the light and reason which all men crave, whether they know it or not, and which Aristotle, Ulpian, Cicero, Seneca, Virgil give us, perhaps even Homer, although he was not much approved of at the time. But this is not at all what happened. Instead of coming home, instead of seeing that this is it, this is really what we have always wanted and craved for, these at last are rational laws in terms of which we can live, they found that Rome was very, very unlike us indeed: so far from being like us, unlike us; so far from being cognate to us, foreign to us. This had been a shock, which was exploited, as I say, by those Protestant and Huguenot lawyers who deliberately set out to prove that we have nothing to do with Rome. The Romans may have done it: what is Rome to us? What

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

are the patriarchs to us? The patriarchs practised polygamy: we do not. Why should we be interested in what they do in the Bible? A great many ancient tribes practised incest: we do not. Very interesting to know they did, but no moral for us. The idea that the ancient world has no moral for us is something quite new, because it breaks the sacred principle that the truth is one, that wise men have always known it, and the important thing is to discover somebody who will tell you the truth, maybe Plato, maybe Aristotle, maybe Virgil, maybe Ulpian, maybe somebody else; but always look for *the* answer, the one true answer to the serious questions, which somebody possesses and which we might yet be able to recover by archaeological means.

That is the second thing. This leads again to the notion of a plurality of cultures, the idea that there are not timeless truths. Aristotle is wrong, and the Stoics are wrong, and Seneca is wrong, and Ulpian is wrong, and St Thomas is wrong, and Virgil is wrong, and Spinoza and Locke and Helvétius are all wrong too, ultimately. This is the result, and this leads to the early emergence of the notion of which Wyndham Lewis, the English critic, once called the 'demon' of the idea of progress in the arts, that is to say, the notion that the arts progress in some sort of way, that because things are later they must either be worse or better – but you can always say which – than something earlier. You can ask yourself: Is Virgil an improvement or not an improvement on Sophocles? Is Shakespeare an improvement or not an improvement on Dante? Is Joyce an improvement or not an improvement on Dickens? These questions are in some sense idiotic, and can be seen to be such, particularly in the history of painting, where you cannot ask the question whether Manet or Picasso is or is not an improvement on Correggio or Raphael, or something of the sort. In what sense are they improvements and in what sense are they diminutions of them, or retrogressions from them? But if you cannot ask that, surely this applies to the humanities in general, so that within a culture you can speak of growth, you can speak of progress, you can speak of new techniques, you can speak of certain problems being solved less or more successfully; but as between perhaps rather vaguely demarcated cultures, but cultures nevertheless, it is very difficult to talk like this. You can talk of influences, but since the questions are different, the answers to one set of questions are not strictly relevant to answers to another lot of questions, although you can show how the answers to the first lot of

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

questions in fact generated the second lot of questions, and that is what history consists of, at least cultural history. This I think did begin, in this sense, as a result of the political collision of French lawyers [*gap of 8 seconds in the tape*].

It seems to me, to come back to Vico, that it is intrinsically unlikely that Vico would not have known anything about this at all. He was after all brought up as a Roman lawyer. People look for anticipators in philosophy, but he was not a philosopher (how much Aristotle he read I do not know, but not very much; perhaps more Plato). He was brought up as a Roman lawyer, and an antiquarian Roman lawyer at that, and virtually all his examples come from Roman law. The big row of the sixteenth century between the Romanists and the anti-Romanists was a notorious affair, and the thought that Vico should not have known about it seems highly improbable. Yet one cannot prove that he actually did. Of course he mentions all these great names. He mentions the name of Bodino – Bodin – whose political views he tries to argue against in a chapter of the *New Science*. He talks about Otmano, he talks about Salmasio. He talks about the *Anti-Triboniano* by Otmano – the *Anti-Tribonian* by Hotman – but not in this connection. He knew the names and of course he knew the works, because they were familiar to any student of Roman law, particularly a historical student of Roman law. Therefore one cannot prove that this is what he has in mind. The proposition, however, that he did not have it in mind does seem to me somewhat improbable, since the doctrine that there are different nations, different cultures, that we must understand history to understand law, and law to understand history, that they both emanate from some kind of common *moeurs*, that there is a *façon de vivre*, that there are *formes de vivre* and so on – these things seem to me forms, of course very embryonic, of what Vico afterwards stated. Very embryonic indeed: what Vico did was profoundly and boldly original; what he made of it is something quite different from what any of these lawyers would have dreamt of doing. In no way is his originality or greatness derogated from by the fact that these lawyers wrote what they did; nevertheless there does appear to me to be at least a high probability of a link.

If so, why did not someone say so? Why did not Vico say so? There are many reasons, none of them convincing. First of all, one may sometimes not be very apt to admit one's sources, except by attacking them. Of course, all these people were heretics. Well, he

#### TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

talks about Grotius and Bacon too with great approval, and Selden and other Roman lawyers of the seventeenth century who are also heretical, and Pufendorf – Pufendorfio is always appearing in his text. But these people did not attack the Roman Church: Grotius and Pufendorf, Selden and the others were not militantly engaged in undermining the actual politics of the Roman Church, whereas the lawyers of whom Vico speaks were still regarded with a certain degree of horror, because they were engaged in violent political anti-papalist strife. Still, as I say, this is not wholly convincing.

Secondly, he in general does not quote sources much for his most central ideas. Since he says that he is very original, that his foot will now tread in lands where no foot has ever trodden before, rather like Machiavelli – it is quite a commonplace thing to say, even if for once he was right – it would perhaps derogate from it a little bit if he mentioned all these sources. Of course, it must also be remembered that the *New Science* is only a quarter of its original size. The original work was an enormous volume, even bigger than the one we have, in which he refuted and confuted a vast number of other lawyers and jurists, but he could not publish it because he did not have enough funds. He dedicated the book to a cardinal (who later became Pope), who promised to pay for it, but in the end said, as sometimes happens, that he had certain other obligations, he had certain other commitments, which made it quite impossible for him to do this. Vico then pawned a ring, but the pawning of the ring produced enough money to print only a quarter of the original work; so he destroyed three-quarters of it, and nothing remains. It may have been the making of the book – it *may* have been – but it may also be the case that all kinds of names which occurred in the destroyed three-quarters are now missing. However, all this I merely throw out as a possibility.

There is one more thing I should like to add as a possible reason for this silence. There is something rather strange about the fact that Nicolini and all these other admirable, scrupulous, learned and otherwise wholly explicit Italian scholars never mention these French names at all, never. There does appear to be some kind of gulf yawning between Italian and French scholarship, which at least in the days of Croce and his successors appears to me, in rather a peculiar way, to be yawning still. It was certainly wider in the seventeenth century. There were these two great establishments, the *mos gallicus* and the *mos italicus*, in the interpretation of the law. The *mos italicus* was a narrow juristic

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

interpretation of the law in accordance with the actual terms used – sticking to the professional terms of law. The *mos gallicus*, the French manner of treating the law, brought in history and other circumstances; and there was warfare between them, not only at the level of the law, but at every level. Vico's first important published work was an attack upon the French for attacking the Italians for being romantic, for using too many metaphors; it was an attack on the abbé de Bouhours, an attack on various Frenchmen who said: The lucidity of French prose, the exquisite freedom from metaphor of the great works of Racine, are a model to the world, not these dark, tangled growths of exaggerated and exotic Italian rhetoric, which completely obscure the sense and are a degeneration of the old Roman spirit of which they are unworthy successors, and so on, and so on. Vico, who was a patriotic Italian, attacked the French for these monstrous charges, and said that children brought up in the French manner on the mathematics and logic of Descartes would grow up completely shrivelled and intellectualised and totally incapable of understanding what is worth understanding, which is art, literature and religion.

So the warfare was already on. But it was nothing to the great wars between the lawyers, between the supporters of the *mos gallicus* and the *mos italicus*. Let me quote a fairly typical passage from one of the French lawyers, quoted by Alberico Gentili towards the end of the sixteenth century, about the Italians. The author was a defender of the *mos gallicus*. He says that the Italians, that is to say, the Italian legal interpreters, the upholders of the *mos italicus*, are

peasants, noxious creatures, sophists, fools and barbarians, cannibals, strangers to all humanities, slaves, cheapjacks, given to pettifogging quarrels, toadies, lepers, diseases of the intellect, disgusting sewers, perverters, murderers of scholars, shouters, jugglers, yokels, men not quite right in the head, lunatics, wretches, people who do not understand their own words, chatterboxes, idiots, crooks, climbers[?], misers, and men whose words cannot be understood by any sane human being.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Alberico Gentili, *De iuris interpretibus dialogi sex*, sixth dialogue, ad init.: p. 189 in Guido Astuti (ed.), *Alberici Gentilis De iuris interpretibus dialogi sex* (Turin, 1937). For the passage after the quoted statement, Gentili cites Joannes

## TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

Very well, if this is the attitude of French jurists towards Italian jurists, we must assume that there was a good deal of dissension between them, and a good deal of anti-Gallic feeling, Gallophobe feeling, must have accumulated in Vico's breast. He was after all an inheritor of these excellent men of the *mos italicus* to whom he felt absolutely devoted, and in whose midst he grew up, to whom he was loyal, who brought him up from being a poor boy in a squalid bookshop in a back street of Naples. If Vico's loyalties lay with these people, it is perhaps not altogether surprising that the one set of persons to whom he proposed to owe no obligation were these odious French scholars who took so very low a view of the Italians, and to whom, therefore, no kind of generous consideration was to be given.

That is the only explanation I can offer you of this notable silence – some kind of *odium academicum* (which is not to be discounted too far), as it broke out not only in the early eighteenth century, of which I am speaking, but which, so far as the interpreters of Vico are concerned, in some peculiar way still persists. If you look at Croce's great masterpiece on Vico there is not a word about any possible French anticipator, not a word about any lawyer, any jurist, any expert on Roman law whom Vico could conceivably have heard of, and this in itself is a little strange.

I do not propose to end with a rousing peroration of any kind, but only to say that my whole purpose has been only to demonstrate that the notion of the plurality of cultures is a comparatively late growth; that the man who probably put it on the map most of all, if only he had been read, was Vico; that it really derives from the political and social and juristic quarrels, it seems to me, mainly stimulated by the Reformation, in the end, both in Germany and in France; that the person who put it on the map in the end was of course Herder, who had an enormous influence upon every kind of linguistic nationalism or self-assertion by cultural groups, upon the whole notion of the search for cultural identity, which fills our world, and filled the nineteenth century, too, when almost every group – even the most peaceful, the least political groups – always tried to identify itself in terms of

---

Ferrarius Montanus (1485[?]-1558): *Ioannis Ferrarii Montani Adnotationes in IIII. institutionum Iustiniani libros* (Lyons, 1532), p. 37 (on Justinian's Prooemium). Gentili adapts the passage from Montanus.

#### TWO NOTIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

some kind of historical culture, to which, rightly or wrongly, it felt itself to belong. After all, even the Austro-Socialists, the mildest of men, were prey and victims, or perhaps quite justified supporters, of the notion of some kind of cultural autonomy, because of which, although they might be living in Vienna, although they might be living in Trieste, nevertheless their children were to be taught in Slovene or in Czech or in whatever it might be. So we find it in Wales, and so we find it in Ireland, and so we shall doubtless find it in many places to come. The origins of all this appear to me to lie in no place other than the quarrels of men with the outlandish names of Hotman and Saumaise, on the one hand, and various forgotten defenders of Henry III or the popes of the sixteenth century, on the other. In this peculiar way, it seems to me, human history proceeds.

© *The Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust 2005*

**Posted 24 November 2005**