

Interpreting History

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DYNAMICS.

Vol. I: *Fluctuation of Forms of Art*; II: *Fluctuation of Systems of Truth, Ethics and Law*; III: *Fluctuation of Social Relationships, War, and Revolution*. By Pitirim A. Sorokin. New York: American Book Co. 1937. \$6 a volume, \$15 the three volumes.

Reviewed by FRANK H. KNIGHT

IN the face of this monster parade of learning, the present reviewer is hesitant to speak. Apart from the necessary time and space limitations imposed by a review, and from plain ignorance, there is the further source of embarrassment that a fourth volume of the work itself, announced as "in preparation," will undoubtedly have for its main task explaining at length what the first three volumes are about. Indeed (since the work is here and has to be reviewed) the first comment may be that it is not too clear why the three volumes of materials and analysis have been given to the public in advance of the author's statement of "Basic Problems, Principles and Methods," the title announced for Volume Four.

The work before us is called on the jacket flaps, "an encyclopedic philosophy of history." It is sociology in the grand manner, perhaps its grandest so far. The same source places the author in the company of Comte, Spencer, Ranke, Pareto, Weber, and Spengler, and the author names also Vico in the first preface. The title might have been "What the educated man should know about civilization," or "Civilization, its ups and downs." It is a magnificent cram-book for a "comprehensive examination in art, philosophy, science, and politics." The main "advance" beyond previous similar works is the application, on such a scale, of the quantitative method. The three volumes contain one hundred and thirty-three statistical tables—up to ten pages or so in length—and sixty-three graphs of assorted types. Also a page sample of coefficients of correlation, out of a larger number said to have been computed. This from the man who has sarcastically criticized statistical sociology as practised by others, notably the authors of "Recent Social Trends in the United States," published while the present work was in the making.

The theme is the "fluctuations" of cultural forms between two extremes or limiting types designated as "ideational" and "sensate." These terms are defined at some length, but have no very definite meaning; "religious" and "materialistic" would as accurately express the contrast. Numerous intermediate or mixed types are described under various names in connection with various phases of the cultural process. Of these the "idealistic" oc-

curs most frequently and is also treated as "ideal"; its characterization is especially meagre and vague.

The treatment deals comparatively with specified aspects or elements into which culture is analyzed (without pretense of exhaustiveness). Volume I takes up the fine arts individually, including literature and criticism; Volume II, fourteen aspects of philosophical, scientific, technological, ethical, and juridical change; Volume III, some seven or eight phases of social and political relationships (one chapter, rather weak, on economic cycles), and war. Most of the twenty-odd topical divisions of the study cover Western civilization from about 600 B.C. to about 1920, with fairly large excursions into primitive, Oriental, and near-Eastern cultures. A staggering amount of material has been



ABSTRACT FORMS (Picasso)*

examined, classified, rated, and in most cases tabulated and graphed by the author and a number of collaborators. In addition to primary materials, which include "innumerable" works of art, philosophy and science, documents, etc., over a thousand authorities are cited. (The author has not been reticent in calling attention to the labor and expense involved in achieving "thoroughness.")

Questions and criticisms are suggested at many points, and some of them fairly serious; but in the main the procedure followed is candidly described, with recognition of its limitations, and is ap-

* "The twentieth century shows a conspicuous reaction against Visualism (Sensate art) but as yet has not found the Ideational style. Its art . . . is marked by the usual incoherency of such a transitory period. . . . Whether this reaction of the twentieth century is the sign of the end of the Visual period and of the coming long-time domination of the Ideational style remains to be seen. In the totality of the evidences given in this work, I am inclined to interpret it in that sense." Picture and caption from "Social and Cultural Dynamics."

parently free from crude fallacy or bias. It is, I think, good work of its kind, judged by any standards of reasonable expectation. The question in the reader's mind will rather be to what such a job finally amounts. On this, I would deprecate too uncritical rejection or acceptance. Certainly the numerical results do not really measure anything, but the same is true of so useful a rating as the candle-power of a lamp, if taken rigorously. The general conclusions are not startling. They do not diverge greatly from the answers which would be given to the same questions by a competent college graduate with a fair equipment of courses in general history and a few historical specialties, or by nearly any well read person. But the assembly and presentation of the materials, and the quantitative analysis as well, are extremely interesting, and also highly informative, if viewed intelligently. No one knows enough about what is "important" in this field to be very finical on that score. A few of the reviewer's private notes and queries may perhaps be mentioned.

First; it is the *elements* in culture, and their fluctuations between opposite poles or limits, which are dealt with, generally expressed as percentages; aggregate indices are sometimes given, but nothing is said about them. There is no direct suggestion of defining or measuring culture or civilization as a whole, and no clear reference to its ups and downs. This surely is a thing not to be ignored, particularly the mysterious and crucial phenomenon of general decadence. Secondly, there are only passing references to material, geographic, or economic influences in history. This is a good fault, in view of the tendency greatly to over-emphasize such forces, but it is surely an omission. Where these influences are mentioned it is to treat such notions as a mark of the degeneracy of the modern "sensate phase" of culture! Thirdly, and perhaps most important: my primary interest in the work, from the title, was to learn something about the possible meaning of "dynamics" in sociology, and particularly whether the term, and related terms taken over from physical mechanics, can have more than a figurative analogy of meaning in the two fields. On this point, the methodological discussion (see Volume I, Chapter IV and Volume III, Chapter IV) is quite disappointing. (I shall look forward to Volume IV with hope for more light.) The only theory or causal explanation of social change which is given is simply the factual statement that it is inevitable, a law of life, that every cultural form bears in itself the seeds of its own destruction. The author is especially emphatic in frequently repudiating any "linear" interpretation, i.e., any theory of inevitable progress. (Spencer is usually mentioned; this reaction against evolutionism is of course a dominant note in current anthropological literature.) However, he

just as emphatically rejects the notion of cyclical recurrence. This leaves the third possibility, "variable or creative recurrence," as the position accepted and defended.

Finally: it might go without saying that the real animus back of a philosophy of history is to make history an instrument of prophecy—along with more or less sermonizing. Professor Sorokin holds that the present crisis in Western culture is far deeper than is generally supposed; the "present-day sensate phase" is in a state of decay; in particular, he considers "the days of responsible but free social investigation to be numbered for the present." And the next phase will be brutal and bloody, "a collectivism of the hard-labor prison," "a solidarity of the executioners." But all this, he says, "does not make me at all pessimistic." For beyond the hard transition period "there looms not an abyss of death, but a mountain peak of life." Our "over-stuffed, after-dinner utopia," whose product has come to be "poison gas rather than fresh air" will no doubt give place to a new ideational culture with the absolute values indispensable for disciplining man, who under the sensate phase has conquered nature but degraded himself. Apart from the distant roseate vision our guess is in fair agreement with Professor Sorokin; as to that,—Great is faith; great be the believer's reward!

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Hapsburg Empress

MARIA THERESA: *The Last Conservative*. By Constance Lily Morris. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1937. \$3.50.

Reviewed by GARRETT MATTINGLY

OF Maria Theresa most readers remember that, a beautiful young queen in distress, she appealed, and not in vain, to the chivalry of Hungary to save her throne for the infant she held up in her arms. Some also remember from eighteenth century memoirs, a stout, elderly autocrat who ruled with matriarchal severity a court grown, to the pained astonishment of the easy-going Viennese, the most rigidly puritan in Europe. The puzzling contrast is only in the pages of the historians, not in the facts of history. The empress who ruled the Austrian lands from 1740 to 1780 was a consistent character in the tradition of her Hapsburg ancestors, brave, conscientious, practical, narrowly limited, self-opinionated, obstinate. She probably saved the power of the Austrian Hapsburgs from extinction, she contributed notably to the building of the Austro-Hungarian empire into a quasi-modern state, she helped create a distinctively Austrian culture, and to bring the old regime in Europe to that bloom of per-



THE MONASTERY OF MELK ON THE DANUBE—Visited by Maria Theresa.

fection which precedes decay, and she did all this without being either a romantically attractive figure or a particularly able or intelligent ruler.

This biography of her, based on the best modern authorities, has much to commend it. It is carefully documented, and buttressed by an impressive bibliography, three useful maps, and several genealogical tables. It has a good index. It has drawn on a wide range of sources, including unpublished manuscript material (of no dazzling importance), and it makes a conscientious attempt to present a comprehensive picture of Maria Theresa's activities at home and abroad, and a balanced, sensible, impartial estimate of her character.

It would be pleasanter not to have to insist on such a book's defects. Occasional mistakes are almost unavoidable in covering so broad a field, and the omission and inclusion of details always presents a more or less insoluble problem. After the second chapter on the earlier history of the Hapsburgs, which is so inaccurate and confusing that it would have been better to leave it out, there are no indefensible errors. But the inclusion of so much military and diplomatic detail was surely a major error of judgment. The tangled story of eighteenth century war and diplomacy has often been told before. It is unrelieved here by literary brilliance, and unexcused by fresh material or original interpretation. And it crowds the rest of the book so that one never gets a really clear and vivid picture of Maria Theresa herself, or of her polyglot realms and the changes she saw in them. It is as if Lytton Strachey had felt obliged to discuss the background of the Crimean War, the strategy of Kitchener on the Nile, and the details of Irish Land Reform when he wrote of Victoria. This is a painstaking and, no doubt, for the patient beginner, a useful book, but it might have been much more had it attempted less.

Gothic Legend

BECKFORD. By Guy Chapman. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1937. \$4.

Reviewed by ALEXANDER COWIE

THE author of "Vathek" has somehow escaped the offices of that type of biographer who aims principally to exploit sensation. Actually (on the showing of Guy Chapman, his latest biographer), William Beckford led an almost fabulously romantic life compounded of many of the elements that were to lend glamour to the careers of Byron, Poe, and Oscar Wilde. Born the heir to millions, distinguished by a manner of mingled hauteur and charm, accomplished in singing, dancing, writing, and musical composition, he captivated London by the age of twenty. A few years later he was to be an outcast. Clouds of disapproval gathered over his diabolical Oriental studies, his alleged experiments in black magic (mesmerism was in the air), his lavish pagan entertainments at Fonthill, and his liaison with his cousin's wife. Finally he was accused (on strong evidence, though without proof) of an offense against a young boy. Beckford's other sins John Bull could forgive, but his lapse from normality was too much: Beckford became an exile. The continent was his—Lisbon, Madrid, Paris, Naples—but England could not easily be regained. His proffer of political services was snubbed. "Vathek" was admired critically, but Britain's outraged heart was not to be wooed by French idiom and Oriental fantasy. Regarded coldly on his return, Beckford immured himself in an authentic Gothic castle (none of your "gimcrack" villas like Walpole's) at Fonthill, where, surrounded by the rarest art treasures and attended by the queerest people, he became a legend. Financial losses occurred, and the legend moved to Bath. Gradually, public indignation at Beckford's sins tapered off into tolerance of an eccentric connoisseur whose devotion to the arts partly redeemed his warped character.

Mr. Chapman provides these facts. If he had chosen to spray them with journalism, he might have made his book a lurid, best-selling biography. As it is, he does not flinch from unsavory episodes in Beckford's life, but his main purpose is to set down a meticulously accurate biographical chronicle. To this end, he has tunnelled through mountains of data, the most important of which he has tabulated in the appendices. In passing he has been able to correct earlier commentators. Nevertheless scholarship has not dried up the well of his humor or dulled his very fine word-sense. From a literary point of view, "Beckford" is one of the ripest biographies of the year. In a modest preface Mr. Chapman speaks of how much still remains to be done on Beckford's life, but for all save the most abandoned specialist this book must be sufficient.