

The Forward Eagle

Compiled Weekly

for

The Riverdale Senior Services Center
Bronx, NY

“Let us endeavor mutually to enlighten one another.”

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Histoire de France

One day in January of 1824, a young French professor named Jules Michelet, found the name Giambattista Vico in a footnote in a book he was reading. The reference to Vico interested him so much that he immediately set out to read Vico's book in its original Italian text.

Vico had never been translated into French and was little known outside of his native Italy. Vico was born and lived in Naples, a poor province, at the time that the Vatican Inquisition had begun to stifle the advances of the Italian Renaissance.

Vico, by reason of his humble origins, missed the opportunity of an academic career. His path of advancement had been blocked. Still, he pushed ahead with his studies and ideas of history. In 1725 he published a work called *Principles of a New Science Dealing with the Nature of Nations, Through Which Are Shown Also New Principles of the Natural Law of Peoples*.

Among Michelet's projects was “a history of race considered as an individual,” and a work on “the character of peoples as revealed by their vocabularies.”

Vico had read Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and decided to apply to the study of human history methods similar to those proposed by Bacon for the study of the natural sciences. Later he had read Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), who had advocated an historical study of philosophy and theology in terms of the languages and actions of diverse races, with the goal of constructing universally acceptable laws.

One hundred years later the young Jules Michelet had been searching for the principles of a new science of history. Among his projects had been “a history of race considered as an individual,” and a work on “the character of peoples as revealed by their vocabularies.”

Michelet desired to “mingle history with philosophy.” He read Vico's first volume through without stopping. From the collision of Michelet's mind with Vico's a new philosophical-artistic world was born, a recreated social history. “I was seized by an incredible intoxication with Vico's great historical principles,” Michelet wrote in 1824.

Even reading Vico today, Michelet's excitement can be felt. It is strange and stirring to find in Vico's *Scaena Nuova* the

stirrings of a modern sociological and anthropological mind.

Human history had hitherto been written as a series of biographies of great men, as chronicles of remarkable happenings or as pageantry directed by kings and clergy.

Vico explained the history of societies by their sources and their environments. Like individual human beings, societies pass through regular phases of growth. “The facts of known history are extracted from their primitive origins,



Giambattista Vico
Philosopher (1668-1744)

divorced from which they have no coherence.”

“The nature of things is nothing other than that they come into being at certain times and in certain ways. Whatever the circumstances permit, the same phenomena arise.”

“A light appears in the dark which shrouds from our eyes remote antiquity; the social world is the work of men; it follows that one should find its principles in human intelligence itself,” Vico wrote.

The ideas Michelet discovered in Vico were not new. In Europe useful knowledge had greatly increased during the eighteenth century, the years that separated the two lives of Vico the writer and Michelet the reader:

- Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet, 1694-1778) cleared the gods and the heroes away.
- Montesquieu (Charles Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brede et de Montesquieu, 1689-1755) declared human institutions were related to racial habit and climate.
- Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) proposed an evolutionary theory of cultures.
- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) published an exposition of the chemistry of social change.

How was it that Vico's *Scaena Nuova* could come to Jules Michelet in 1824 as an intoxicating revelation? Vico's imaginative genius, its remarkable power and scope, enabled Michelet to understand, for

the first time, the organic character of human society, and the importance of the historical integration of the forces and factors which composed human life.

Vico described his achievement as an explanation of the “foundation of human law” and an indication of “the specific phases and the regular processes by which customs give rise to events, such as religions, languages, dominations, commerce, etc. . . . Of all these social elements, these customs in terms of their phases and growth, cannot be otherwise.”

The ideas Michelet discovered in Vico were not new.

Michelet began his own publications and preachings, as on an occasion of an awards ceremony, “Woe to him who tries to isolate one department of knowledge from the rest. All science is one, language, literature, history, physics, mathematics and philosophy. Subjects which seem the most remote from one another are in reality connected, or rather they all form a single system.”

Word of the week

salutary

/ˈsæljətəri/

adjective

1. producing a beneficial effect, remedial, salutary influences
2. promoting health, curative

“The accident should be a *salutary* lesson to be more careful.”

“The low interest rates should have a *salutary* effect on business.”

Origin:

Latin: *Salus* ("health, safety, welfare") and *salūtāris* ("healthful, beneficial").

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This paper is offered as a review of recent topics taken up by the current events discussion group at The Riverdale Senior Services Center.

Please join us at the Center for Ageless Living, 2600 Netherland Avenue, Bronx, NY each Monday at 1:00 o'clock in the afternoon for Current Events & Discussion.