

The book of history is subject to numerous interpretations. Two wholly opposed points of view are evident. One group sees in all earthly things nothing but a wretched cycle. In the life of peoples like in that of individuals, and in organic nature in general, they see growth, flowering, decay, and death; spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Their's is the slogan: "There is nothing new under the sun" even this slogan being no longer new since, some two thousand years ago, the king of the Orient had murmured it. They shrug their shoulders at our civilization, which is destined to yield to barbarism; they shake their heads at our struggles for freedom, which in the end would only further the rise of new tyrants; they smile at all efforts of political enthusiasm designed to make the world a better and happier place and which, in the end, would cool off without accomplishing anything. In the little chronicle of hopes, needs, misfortunes, pains and joys, errors and disappointments with which the individual spends his life, in that human chronicle they see the history of humankind. . . . Opposed to the above mentioned "fatally fatalistic" point of view stands a more lucid opinion which approaches the idea of providence more closely. According to that view, all earthly things move towards a more beautiful perfection, and great heroes and heroic epochs are only steps to a higher, god-like state of mankind when the political and moral struggle finally leads to the holiest peace, to the purest brotherhood, and to the most eternal happiness. We were not expelled from paradise by a flaming sword, but we have yet to conquer it with a flaming heart and through love. The fruit of knowledge bringeth not death but eternal life. "Civilization" is the watchword of the adherents of such a conception. . . . Neither conception. . . . seems to agree too well with our most vital sentiments concerning life. On the one hand, we do not want to vainly spend our enthusiasm by placing our highest stake in what is hopelessly transitory. On the other hand, we also want the present to retain its value and not have it considered only a means, the future being its purpose. Indeed, we feel too important to consider ourselves the means to an end. After all, it rather appears to us that "means" and "ends" are nothing but conventional concepts which man has thought into nature and history, concepts of which the creator knew nothing, each creation being an end in itself and each event conditioning itself, and everything, even the universe itself existing and occurring for its own sake. Life is neither a means nor an end, it is a right. Life seems to claim this right against stiffening death, against the past, and this very process of claiming is the essence of revolution. The melancholic indifference of historians and poets must not paralyze our energy in this business; and the raving of the saviors of the future must not beguile us into risking the interests of the present, the right to life, and the rights of men that are still in need of defense. "Le pain est le droit du peuple", said Saint-Just, and these have been the greatest words pronounced during the entire revolution.

Heinrich Heine: Verschiedenartige Geschichtsauffassung.