

4. TEACHING THE FUTURE

A Contribution to the Intellectual and Moral Growth of the Participants

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Cassandra foretold the fall of Troy, Jeremiah prophesied the doom of Jerusalem. Similarly, Benedetto Croce reminds us that, in mediaeval historiography, we find the idea of a history of things future, an idea continued in the Renaissance by the paradoxical Francesco Patrizzi. The oracles of Nostradamus, Patrizzi's contemporary, have recently become a best-seller because of the alleged prophecies they contain about the frightful happenings of our days. Throughout history, in times of crisis prophets and seers have abounded who, stirring the masses, have gained a passionate following. In the more quiet periods succeeding the times of trouble, preoccupation with the future was not a mass phenomenon. It remained for artists and poets to paint their visions while, here and there, chiliastic preachers and utopian revolutionaries dreamed of the millenium that was soon to be born. Since the "dawn of conscience" in the days of the Egyptian prophets, the future has been both the sacred preserve of the genius and the happy hunting ground of the charlatan. Theirs was the monopoly of the "beyond" of space and time.

Prophetic voices of all varieties, however, were bound to be stilled by the onrushing tide of the scientific age. To the diligent student of things exact and the pedantic teacher of events past and present, any attempt to delve into the future seemed a ridiculous undertaking worthy only of contempt. It so happened that the culmination of modern scientific development coincided with the era of social stability of the past century, encouraging scientists to restrict their investigations to the past of man and the invariably recurring present of nature.

In a relatively static age, basic social change is too slow to enter into the consciousness of its contemporaries. In their eyes, past, present, and future are basically identical, each constituting but a link in the endless chain of repetitious events which makes up the whole of human development. To people living in a period of crisis such as ours, however, the future appears to be basically different from the past. In such historical moments, the present is felt to have little reality of its own, representing, so to speak, merely a turning point between the past that is irretrievably lost and a future that is radically new. Then the history of the past is not only reinterpreted in the light of the present, but the future throws its shadow over both the present and the past. We are living through an upheaval comparable to the neolithic and urban revolution which brought about the first civilizations. Whatever may be in