



G. B. VICO

THE ANTIMODERNIST

BY MARK LILLA

Many great minds of the modern world, from Karl Marx to James Joyce, have claimed Giambattista Vico as an intellectual forefather. But Mark Lilla finds that these admirers usually misread the arguments of the West's first antimodernist.

Giambattista Vico was born in Naples in 1668 and died there in 1744. The son of a modest bookseller, he received an unconventional education, tutoring himself in his father's shop between short and difficult periods in Jesuit schools. At the age of 19 he left the city to tutor the sons of a minor aristocrat and spent much of the next nine years studying Latin and writing mediocre poetry. On returning to Naples he began to frequent scientific and philosophical circles with ties to those in other European capitals, but he never traveled again or mastered another European

language. His professional advancement was blocked at almost every turn. Although trained in law, he failed to win a highly prized university chair in that discipline and remained instead an ill-paid professor of rhetoric for more than 40 years, supplementing his income by writing Latin inscriptions and court histories. The audience for his own philosophical writings—on metaphysics, jurisprudence, and finally a “new science concerning the common nature of the nations”—hardly extended beyond Naples during his lifetime. He admired Leibniz and Newton as “the two foremost minds of our age,” but all his efforts to

engage their pan-European intellectual circles ended in bitter, embarrassing failure. He died at home in poverty and obscurity, a provincial curiosity having left no apparent trace on the European thought of his time.

As the English historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin has remarked, "Vico's life and fate is perhaps the best of all known examples of what is too often dismissed as a romantic fiction—the story of a man of original genius, born before his time, forced to struggle in poverty and illness, misunderstood and largely neglected in his lifetime, and all but totally forgotten after his death." It is indeed a romantic story, and in more than one respect. For the fact that we read Vico today, that many consider him an undiscovered genius or even a prophet, must be credited to his rediscovery during the 19th century in the cultural upheaval that has come to be called Romanticism. Indeed, Vico's works, including the now-famous *New Science* (1744) were virtually unknown to educated Europeans until the Romantics happened upon them. The most important was French historian Jules Michelet, who reported a "frenzy caught from Vico" in 1824, which soon became an "incredible intoxication with his great historical principle." Eventually Michelet declared that "I have no other master than Vico." Upon the appearance of

Michelet's abridged French translation of the *New Science* in 1827, Vico gained immediate renown as the first thinker to have stumbled upon the historical, political, and aesthetic ideas then sweeping the continent. Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce's later judgment of Vico, that he was "neither more nor less than the 19th century in germ," was confirmed time and again by those who claimed to find in his writings what Michelet called the "principle of man's self-creation."

To those touched by the Romanticism of the age, Vico's works appeared to offer scientific grounds for a Promethean view of human nature and society. Through his analysis of poetry and early religion, Vico seemed to have discovered that human beings make their own social arrangements through language, that

the moral truths of those arrangements change with language, and that they might be rejuvenated by our returning—through a historical *ricorso*—to the pagan and poetic beginnings of the first societies.

The Vico we read today is, in most respects, the same figure we inherited from this Romantic rediscovery. Even now he is esteemed as a pioneer by many who possess only a passing familiarity with his writings. These admirers believe he discovered new philosophical principles essential to the modern outlook: namely, that man transforms his own nature in history and that truth changes in different cultural or linguistic contexts. If anything, increased aware-



Frontispiece of Vico's *Scienza nuova* (1744)

ness of Vico's historical background has heightened the popular sense of his originality. Edmund Wilson expressed the view of many readers when he wrote in 1940 that "it is strange and stirring to find in the *Scienza nuova* the modern sociological and anthropological mind waking amid the dusts of a provincial school of jurisprudence of the end of the 17th century and speaking through the antiquated machinery of a half-scholastic treatise." The 19th century, which produced poets and revolutionaries, looked to the *New Science* for a celebration of the imagination and of national liberation. (James Joyce was the last of these poets.) The late 20th century, which produces scholars and critics, has taken a cooler view of that work but still finds it seductive. Today Vico is the domesticated property of the university, where he is honored by modern sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and social historians for his theories of language and culture.

To those who devote more careful study to Vico's philosophy, it is tempting to dismiss these readings out of hand as naive or anachronistic, since it is a rule of intellectual history that we not visit upon our forefathers the sins of their children. Yet there are cases in which this rule must be bent, and Vico's is one of them. It is not uncommon for a thinker who stands above his time to be ignored by it, nor for his aims to be recovered and exploited in a later period through the workings of what might be called intellectual "action at a distance" or, better still, "elective affinities." Indeed, a work's ability to elicit such affinities across centuries may even reveal important clues about a thinker's original motivations which a too-narrow conception of geographical and temporal context can cause us to miss. In Vico's case, the contrast between the frigid reception his works received during his lifetime and the enormous

interest they generated in the 19th and 20th centuries is so striking, so out of the ordinary, as to raise an intriguing set of questions: Could it be that the Romantics were on to something? Did they see something essential to Vico's philosophy that his contemporaries were unprepared to understand? And might the "elective affinities" between Vico and the intellectual revolution of the 19th century in turn reveal something fundamental about the latter?

These are the forceful and highly influential questions that have been posed by Isaiah Berlin. More than any other contemporary historian of ideas, Berlin has given the affinities between Vico and the intellectual movements growing out of 19th-century Europe a central place in the interpretation of both. It is to him that we owe our current awareness of how Vico's philosophy anticipated the important current of modern thought that has been called the "Counter-Enlightenment." Although Vico has never lacked partisans and promoters since his rediscovery at the hands of Michelet, most have used his ideas as stalking-horses for their own (be they Hegelian, Marxist, Catholic, nationalist, or other). Isaiah Berlin has taught us to see Vico as an early participant in a much grander quarrel between the two most important schools of modern thought: one that finds its roots in the French Enlightenment and one that developed as a Counter-Enlightenment reaction, especially in 19th-century Germany. At the head of one school stand the great French philosophes: Descartes, Voltaire, Diderot, d'Alembert, and Helvetius. At the head of the other school stands the lonely figure of Vico, whose forgotten books of the early 18th century anticipated those of the great German Counter-Enlightenment writers—Johann Georg Hamann, Johann Gottfried von Herder, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, and the Romantic poets. It is Berlin's further conten-

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tion that this quarrel has never been settled to the satisfaction of either intellectual party, each of which still has partisans today. Understanding the debate between the Enlightenment and its critics is therefore a precondition for mapping the intellectual landscape of our own age.

This assessment of Vico's place within modern thought depends on an interpretation of the Enlightenment that was first popularized by the Counter-Enlightenment itself. In this view, the philosophes were radical rationalists who dogmatically held all truths about nature and man to be universal, objective, timeless, and transparent to reason. As a movement they propounded essentially ahistorical philosophical and political doctrines that proved to be (as Berlin described them) utopian, inflexible, deterministic, arrogant, unfeeling, homogenizing, and intolerant. Vico was the first thinker to sense that the modern rationalism of Descartes carried within itself the seeds of just such errors. And it was this insight into Descartes that put Vico on a new path, one that would later be widened into the high road of Counter-Enlightenment.

In important respects, German thinkers of the 19th century only exploited and applied ideas that Vico had already articulated (however confusedly) in the early 18th. Isaiah Berlin has identified seven such "time-defying notions" that Vico first offered as alternatives to Enlightenment dogma. They are: that human nature is changeable, and that humans themselves contribute to this change; that man only knows what he creates; that therefore the human sciences are distinct from and superior to the natural sciences; that cultures are wholes; that cultures are created essentially through self-expression; that art is a major form of such expression; and that we may come to understand the expressions of other cultures, in the present or past, through the exercise of reconstructive imagination. However disorganized this catalogue may be, its drift is clear enough. For Berlin, Vico's writings represent the first significant effort to

derive a modern philosophy of knowledge free from rationalism. More important still, they unveiled a new approach to other cultures, permitting us to understand foreign peoples in their own terms, rather than judging them, as the Enlightenment allegedly had, in the high court of inflexible, eternal reason. Berlin calls this new epistemological and cultural outlook "pluralism," and he has championed it against the "monism" he detects in the Enlightenment.

This interpretation of Vico as a pluralist goes a long way toward explaining the enduring interest in his writings ever since their rediscovery in the early 19th century. The reaction against the Enlightenment in the aftermath of the French Revolution was profound and focused precisely on this issue of monism. The universal political doctrines of the philosophes were held to be responsible for the butchery of the Terror and Napoleonic imperialism: On this, if on nothing else, the new intellectual parties of "right" and "left" born during these events agreed. In place of those doctrines they proposed more particularist ones, rooted in ethnic nationalism, religion, or radical communitarianism (and, in several cases, a combination of these elements). More thoughtful critics of the Enlightenment understood, quite rightly, that the pursuit of universal political standards was itself driven by the assumption that the natural light of reason shines equally in all human beings—that, like fire, it burns in Greece and Persia alike. The Counter-Enlightenment philosophers sought to deny this assumption, charging that the priority given reason in the 18th century had driven out feeling and imagination and that its presumed universality ignored the traditional and prejudicial background of all human understanding. These ideas about feeling, imagination, prejudice, and tradition then became central elements in the Counter-Enlightenment case for epistemological and cultural pluralism.

The mark left on our political and intellectual landscape by this philosophical turn would prove to be enduring, as would the

periodic return to Vico's writings. The reason is that the Counter-Enlightenment did more than offer an alternative to the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It also managed to give intellectual form to an inchoate dissatisfaction with modern life by focusing that dissatisfaction on the Enlightenment—which now was charged with defacing nature in the name of scientific and technological progress, with destroying traditional communities in the name of cosmopolitanism and individualism, and with encouraging political extremism in the name of social engineering. To the extent that Vico is a philosophical forerunner of the Counter-Enlightenment, his works will remain as timely as this distaste for the modern age. Berlin has made it abundantly clear in his writings that he does not share this general distaste for modernity, that only the political excesses of our century attracted him to the Counter-Enlightenment, and that he recognizes the many political dangers latent in this alternative tradition (especially nationalism). Still, it is the Enlightenment he blames for the political disasters of our time, and it is to Vico that he turns in building his case against the Enlightenment heritage. Berlin is not alone. For a century and a half now, from the Romantics down to the present, the party of Vico has consistently attracted those who see in the Enlightenment the source of modern problems and who have sought a more humane teaching in the baroque edifice of the *New Science*.

The problem with this view is that, although Vico may indeed have numerous affinities with the Counter-Enlightenment, he was hardly a pluralist. An attentive reading of his entire philosophical corpus reveals that he was a far more profound critic of the modern age than has previously been supposed and that his departure from the premises of modern thought led him in a new and disturbing direction—not toward a more humane tempering of Enlightenment doctrines but toward a highly novel appeal to order and authority made in the new language of mod-

ern science. Vico's first philosophical works, his *Orations* (1699–1706) and his *Metaphysics* (1710), are written in a theological idiom; his final *New Science* (1744) appears to be a modern scientific treatise. It is precisely this combination of premodern theology and modern method that is the key to understanding his thought. Vico is the father of the first anti-modern social science, and it is in the light of this new science that the intellectual heritage of the Counter-Enlightenment deserves reconsideration.

This conclusion is quite out of keeping with the standard interpretations of Vico's philosophy, especially those current in the Anglophone world. The usual approach to Vico in the United States and England has been to focus attention almost exclusively on his final masterpiece, the *New Science*, and to plunder the earlier (and generally untranslated) works selectively for premonitions of his science. This has led to a highly selective reading of that treatise, one which tends to heighten its "modern" or "forward-looking" character. Such an approach is understandable, for even in the remarkable translation by Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch, the *New Science* remains a highly perplexing book. More than one reader has opened it expectantly in the hope of discovering the key to modern pluralism, only to become lost in what seem to be interminable archaic digressions on biblical chronology, philology, Greek myth, the history of Roman law, and fine points of Christian theology. Vico's late writing style alternates between that of Francis Bacon and Isidore of Seville, the seventh-century author of the wildly idiosyncratic Latin sourcebook, *Etymologies* (which Vico often cites). Modern readers understandably latch on to Vico's more Baconian pronouncements as the source of his philosophical novelty and ignore the rest as unessential. They find it unimaginable that the spirits of Bacon and Isidore could coexist in the breast of one man. Yet such coexistence is not only possible but absolutely essential to what Vico hoped to achieve.

To understand Vico we must begin where he began, and that is with God. Vico did not begin writing as a historian or as a scientist. He began as a theological metaphysician defending his craft against the onslaught of modern philosophical skepticism. All of Vico's first writings are concerned with the relation between "things human and divine" and are directed against the impious curiosity he sees at work in the modern philosophy of Descartes. Vico believes that human beings are fallen, and that their fall imposed certain limits on their activities, which they transgress at their peril. "*Homo neque nihil neque omnia est*," Vico wrote in 1710: "Man is not nothing nor everything." He therefore criticizes Descartes' impious ambition to subject all revealed and commonsensical truths to the test of doubt and reason, since such analysis can only produce a generation of skeptics. In response to this skepticism, and as an alternative to Descartes, Vico developed his own theological-metaphysical vocabulary. The concepts he begins using in these early writings remain present in everything he later writes because they reflect his most fundamental motivation: to defend modern man against the skepticism that modern thought instills and to restore in him the prudence and moderation of an earlier age.

From Descartes, Vico then turns his sights on the founders of modern political philosophy—Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, and Bayle. The issue is once again skepticism. In his rarely studied jurisprudential treatise, *Universal Right* (1720–22), Vico asserts that the real social threat of modern skepticism is to be expected from the new political theories, which are materialistic, individualistic, and atheistic, and which instill doubt about traditional political and theological truths. Once again, Vico does not appeal directly to those truths as means of combating skepticism. Nor does he revive a theological conception of politics. Instead he develops a highly original jurisprudential theory that combines modern and premodern elements.

That theory of "universal right" turns out to be a direct political application of his early metaphysical and theological principles. Political man is fallen, Vico repeats, but God remains the divine "origin" of all political right and sets out the developmental "cycle" to guide fallen nations to natural justice. This treatise serves as a necessary link between Vico's metaphysical writings and his *New Science* and even contains his first attempt at writing such a science.

But the real novelty of the *Universal Right* is to be found in its treatment of Rome. The history of Roman law, as Vico understands it, offers a sharp contrast to the growing decadence of European life under the influence of modern thought. Authority and superstition protected the early Romans from the skepticism of Greek philosophy and permitted them to build a great city, then a great empire. Modern political philosophy is actively destroying these irrational foundations of European society, treating them with contempt and denying that man is fallen and therefore limited. Vico's writings from this point on represent a single continuous effort to explain the providential genius behind Roman politics in terms that modern thinkers would find acceptable and thus to make Rome once again a political exemplar for the nations. He begins in the second volume of the *Universal Right* by announcing a new science of philology demonstrating God's providential "constancy" throughout Roman history. But he soon abandons this effort and, in the several editions of his *New Science* written over the next two decades, takes up the more ambitious task of showing how providence guides all nations through an "ideal eternal history" resembling that of the Romans. All nations once were as Rome and therefore can return to their "Roman" roots as an alternative to modern political life. Ancient Rome is thus transformed into a universal model for the development of all nations, by means of modern science. And this science is, in Vico's phrase, a "rational civil theology of divine providence."

Once these three central elements of Vico's early writings are recognized—theol-

ogy, politics, and Rome—the aim and achievement of his final *New Science* can be better understood. That aim is unswerving: to defend pre-rational man and traditional society against the acids of modernity, especially of modern thought. His achievement is extraordinary—although it is not the achievement that many of his readers since the 19th century have attributed to him. Vico is the first European thinker to have presented a profoundly antimodern political theory in the guise of a modern social science. He does not use the reactionary language of later antimoderns to defend traditional societies; instead, he speaks analytically of the subrational “common senses of mankind” which science reveals to be the foundations of every society and which deserve support. He does not present a dogmatic defense of customary societies against developed republics; rather, he uses his science to reveal the hidden glories of all nations’ “divine” and “heroic” ages before they pass into republicanism. Finally, rather than attack directly the subversive skeptical doctrines of modern philosophy, he implies that modern Europe is passing through a cycle, or *ricorso*, of Roman decadence and decline, which was brought about by free thought, individual liberty, and the withering of tradition—in short, by pluralism. He calls this decadence the “barbarism of reflection,” a barbarism brought on not by the abandonment of reason but by the abandonment of “ancient wisdom” in the name of reason. The social futility of philosophy, and especially rational political philosophy, is now demonstrated through a modern science of society.

What Vico understood perhaps more profoundly than any of his predecessors was that the debate over the legitimacy of the modern age is fundamentally a debate about modern philosophy. The standard charge against modern philosophy, from the Counter-Enlightenment down to the present day, has been that of excessive rationalism. Early-modern thinkers, it is asserted, showed too much faith in reason’s

capacities and imposed its dictates on men and nature, often with disastrous results. Vico also makes this charge, which is why he has so frequently been considered a modern “pluralist” resisting the encroaching “monism” of enlightened philosophy. But his charges carry with them certain theological and social presuppositions that have received too little attention. The effect of philosophical rationalism, Vico insists, is not to produce a cold, rationalized, technology-obsessed world. Rationalism brings on social decline by means of religious and political skepticism. And it is his fear of skepticism, of the disorder and decadence that radical doubt could bring about, that animates his long campaign against the modern thinkers. Vico is worried less by what reason is capable of achieving—it is, after all, a thin reed in fallen man—than by what it is capable of destroying.

Vico saw modern thought and modern freedom as mutually reinforcing and therefore as suspect. The modern philosophers taught that man was free from any natural hierarchy and that the only legitimate authority is one he imposes on himself through his own reason. But by teaching men to be skeptical of all authority, especially religious authority, they rendered their own modern societies permanently fragile. Man needs more than reason and freedom to govern himself; he needs belief, tradition, custom, order. Writing before the peak of the French Enlightenment, Vico had anticipated how the antireligious and anti-authoritarian tendencies already present in early-modern thought would manifest themselves fully after his death.

Vico was a conservative, as were many but certainly not all of his 19th-century followers. Although he was read with sympathy by scores of revolutionaries, he attracted an equal number of readers nostalgic for “the world we have lost” after the French Revolution. Revolution and nostalgia were not incompatible sentiments in the 19th century; nor have they been since. Still, it was not a superficial cultural

conservatism that attracted Vico's most important followers. It was rather the well-articulated theory of human nature underlying his conservatism that found such a sympathetic reception, especially among those opposed to the French Enlightenment. Prodded by his encounter with Descartes' philosophy, Vico managed to translate his theology into the language of modern social science. Both his theology and his science teach that man is born a fallen, ignorant creature and cannot develop under his own unassisted power; that he is first a creature of subrational drives and passions rather than of reason; and that he is also a product of language, which speaks through him in history. From the moment Vico turns to historical science to confirm his theology, man is revealed as the object rather than the subject of history. Whether man retains any freedom within history remains uncertain. What is certain is that philosophy does not offer that freedom, since philosophy is itself a historical product. Only science seems, miraculously, to escape history's grasp, and the only freedom Vico's science offers is that of serving and conserving religious wisdom.

Religious wisdom and modern social science are Vico's proposed alternatives to the political liberty and free philosophical reflection offered by the modern age. It is unclear, however, that such a science can always be expected to serve traditional religious wisdom. The history of the social sciences as they developed after Vico certainly offers good reason to question this assumption. Certain great 19th-century social scientists such as Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx turned their sciences directly against religion. Others, like Henri

Saint-Simon and August Comte, spoke openly of the need for order and authority, even of the need to create new religions—a conveniently forgotten, but extremely revealing, chapter in modern intellectual history.

An important part of Vico's legacy to the 19th and 20th centuries is his discovery that modern social science could serve antimodern political and religious ends. More remarkable still, however, was his intuitive sense that a science of man as a subrational creature could be an effective tool for silencing what little reason man has. Vico saw that the liberation of reason in philosophy implied the liberation of man *tout court*, which he rejected. What still deserves explanation is how Vico's scientific conquest of reason could, in the centuries that followed, be construed as a victory for human freedom.

The contemporary attempt to revive aspects of Counter-Enlightenment thought (notably the suspicion of human reason) while retaining selected features of the Enlightenment outlook (notably liberal politics) may be understandable. But it is philosophically and historically naive. Vico, his 19th-century followers, and their adversaries all understood that modern thought carries within itself two tendencies moving in opposite directions, and that one must choose between them. Either one resigns oneself to living within the broad Enlightenment tradition that values reason, skepticism, and freedom, or one sets off with the Counter-Enlightenment thinkers who abandoned those principles in the pursuit of order, authority, and certainty. The modern world offers no third alternative.