

Some Reflections on Oscar Jaszi and his Philosophy of History

Thomas Szendrey

Bringing together the scholarly aspirations and political career of Oscar Jaszi with the field and subject matter of the philosophy of history requires not only an understanding of Jaszi's intellectual, specifically philosophical, development and major contours of his thought as expressed in his numerous writings and extensive correspondence, but also an understanding of what one means by the term philosophy of history and the intellectual and cultural context in which it was undertaken. This is complicated even further by the meanings and values attached to the philosophy of history by the one who is reflecting on these issues.¹

Basically, we are engaged in a dialogue about what is the philosophy of history, what it meant for Jaszi, who never wrote specifically and at length about it, only episodically in works dealing mostly with social and political philosophy. The social and intellectual context in which Jaszi worked opened concerns generally and properly characterized as a philosophy of history, and led to subsequent understandings (or for that matter misunderstandings) of this complex of ideas. There can be no doubt that Jaszi was not first and foremost a philosopher of history as that term will be defined and used in these reflections; however, he did reflect, and often very meaningfully and perceptively, on issues and matters central to the philosophy of history, such as the idea of progress, the nature and role of social science, especially its essentially positivist variant, in the understanding of the nature of human society, including also the issues of the relationship of the individual and society, the problem of historical materialism, philosophy of the state, the issues concerning human destiny, and ultimately a compelling critique of the Marxist philosophy of history, coupled with a statement of his own ideals for humanity generally and a statement of the development of society and the proper role and status of the individual.²

Before turning to some reflections on these themes by citing passages

from some of Jaszi's writings, two points previously alluded to should be developed at least briefly. The first of these is what is meant by the philosophy of history and the relationship of sociology to the philosophy of history, an issue which also much concerned Jaszi and was inevitably among his concerns and that of his contemporaries.³ The second is the intellectual and socio-cultural context in which Jaszi's ideas developed, only to the extent necessary in so brief a discussion and one not centered specifically upon that point.⁴

It is necessary to state at the very inception of an attempt to explain what one means by the philosophy of history to point out that it is by no means only a *Weltanschauung* or complex of attitudes about the issues of human destiny, although the philosophy of history generally commences, at least in one respect, precisely with such issues and concerns. Certainly, any attempt to explain the nature of human existence, individual and social, can and does lead to the formulation of a philosophy of history. Hence, concern with the nature of human existence — of necessity in time — and the direction and goal of human effort (what Karl Jaspers in a book entitled *The Origin and Goal of History* has attempted to explain) constitutes a fundamental dimension of the philosophy of history. This was so aptly described by Karl Löwith in a book dealing with thinkers as diverse as St. Augustine, Vico, Voltaire, Condorcet, Comte, Proudhon and Marx; among these Voltaire first used the term philosophy of history in a modern context and many of the others tried to explain what it was, namely an attempt to explain in some way the meaning of human history. It must be noted, in order to establish some relationship between our concern with Jaszi and the philosophy of history generally, that Jaszi was deeply influenced in his thought, inevitably in an eclectic manner, by most of the thinkers above mentioned. For example, his belief in the idea of progress was derived from the thinkers of the Enlightenment tradition, whereas his sociological interests, the concern with historical materialism, the evolution of social consciousness, from Saint-Simon and Comte as well as Darwin, Marx, and Spencer. Jaszi wrote about these thinkers in numerous essays, but especially, in one entitled, "The Marxian Paradox," 1941, to wit:

There is nothing surprising in the simultaneous elaboration of the democratic and the socialistic doctrines . . . liberalism and socialism are Siamese twins . . . children of the two most fundamental dynamic forms, Equality and Freedom. Socialism simply asserted that constitutional democracy alone cannot realize true Equality and Freedom without giving them an economic foundation. This was the point of view of the great pre-Marxian socialists of the first half of the nineteenth century, who practically laid down all the foundations for the later Marxian synthesis.⁵

Jaszi was to develop further these ideas not only in his critique of the Marxist philosophy of history, but also used the thought of these pre-Marxian socialists in the development and formulation of his own ideas concerning the nature and development of human society, which he himself often characterized as liberal and democratic socialism. It should be added that in his opinion the theories of these pre-Marxian (and later the revisionists such as Eduard Bernstein) socialists did not endanger democracy, which in his estimation—especially in his later writings—was not the case with the message of Marxist socialism, which he considered catastrophic and essentially anti-democratic, indeed approaching a new and inflexible religious orthodoxy.⁶

Continuing the point that one branch of the philosophy of history entails the recognition of pattern and meaning in the ever-evolving human condition, then the recognition of great, indeed even cosmic and new forces in human history, indicates a concern with such philosophical issues. Jaszi's explanation of the social and cultural conditions engendered by a gigantic and blind technological upheaval which uprooted social and individual relations (the industrial revolution and the political upheavals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) certainly helps one to understand the success of the Marxist philosophy of history, especially what was characterized (by Engels) as Marx's discovery of the evolutionary laws of human society. Thus, Jaszi's subsequent critique of the Marxist philosophy of history was accompanied by an understanding of the appeal of Marx's theories to a society which had lost its traditional moorings.

Actually, Jaszi examined Marxism in at least four ways: 1. As a philosophical, sociological, and moral doctrine; 2. An economic interpretation of history; 3. A guide to political action and certainly most significantly from the point of view of the speculative philosophy of history, 4. A normative ideal for future development which of necessity must follow from the pattern expounded by Marx. Jaszi further believed that the historical materialism of Marx was helped along by a behaviorist attitude informed by the belief that human nature can be conditioned, a position Marx shared with many other social scientists. Thus, Jaszi's understanding of Marxist thought and his constantly increasing disagreements with it,⁷ represented perhaps his most significant incursion into a speculative philosophy of history. In the essay cited previously, Jaszi concluded his discussion of Marx in the following words: "Here is a man who regards human nature in all history with contempt and pessimism, yet who prophesies for the future a human nature purified from baser motives."⁸ This theme became the basis of his subsequent discussion and critique of Marxism as practiced by Marxists in power, but even more outspokenly than his critique of the thought of Marx himself. Before dealing with that briefly, here one might only note that Jaszi's ethical idealism (probably the best term for Jaszi's position

in terms of social and political thought) expounded in some of his more philosophical works may indeed represent an unwarranted belief in the efficacy of progress and enlightenment-based optimism about human nature generally. These are also ideas of interest to the speculative philosophy of history, indeed to any philosophically based concern with issues of human destiny and the meaning of human existence in time. One could thus argue that Jaszi concerned himself with the philosophy of history mostly through a critique of the philosophy of history expounded by Marx and the Marxists.

A concern with the meaning of human history by no means exhausts the concerns of the philosophy of history, since the field also has a dimension which adheres more to logic and epistemology rather than metaphysics (broadly conceived, perhaps ontology, and also ethics or moral philosophy), namely the question of how one can know past events or more specifically the nature of historical knowledge. Obviously, our ability to obtain knowledge of ourselves and the social world, or more precisely the explanation of that, has also concerned philosophers of history, social theorists, and philosophers generally. The search for pattern, meaning, and direction is decidedly related to how one obtains knowledge of human history broadly conceived. For example, the attempt to discover the patterns or so-called laws of social development in the study of economic factors only, or even primarily, is not only an issue in the realm of a speculative philosophy of history, but also mandates a method for the study of such phenomena. This particular economic interpretation of history—derived from Marx and dealt with by Jaszi among many others—makes use of the methods of social science and the critical examination of these social sciences and indeed also the related evolutionary theories (derived from Darwin and formulated among others by Spencer) and Jaszi's discussion of these issues in his major theoretical works⁹ form the core of his contributions to what can be considered the philosophy of history in both the speculative and analytical domains. Jaszi was certainly deeply concerned with questions of the methodology of the social sciences, a topic very germane to the methodological concerns of history as a discipline.

Jaszi, for example, pointed out that an economic determinism is not really tenable and one must have recourse to spiritual and moral factors, independently of the materialistic conception inherent in economic determinism. Indeed, this was his major objection to the Marxist philosophy of history in its original Marxian form and even more in its subsequent development into what Jaszi called a system of state religion.¹⁰ These criticisms were noted especially in his recently published posthumous work, where he stated that much harm had been done by the political practice of Marxist-inspired revolutions based upon what Jaszi considered to be the faulty philosophy of history espoused by Marx. His major critical observa-

tions were directed against the idea of catastrophic revolutionary rhetoric, the exclusive revolutionary role of the proletariat, a one-sided materialistic conception of historical development, and a series of what Jaszi considered flippant generalizations about the history of the 100 years before 1848.¹¹ He further implies that this half-mystical, half-revolutionary dialectic must be replaced by another dialectic more carefully constructed to reveal social changes independently of revolutionary rhetoric. Marx, according to Jaszi, helped to provide a method for the analysis of social change, but it must be used without recourse to this revolutionary praxis which for Jaszi distorted the method. Jaszi also objected to the excessively materialistic determination of intellectual, cultural, and moral life and ideals. He emphasized that this spiritual-moral ideology was also a creative activity in itself and without it all social progress would come to an end.

Specifically in terms of the issues of the philosophy of history, Jaszi's one leading idea was his deeply held belief in the idea of progress, from the essentials of which he never deviated and which he held until the end of his life. For him, however, the idea and the fact of progress was by no means limited to the socio-economic sphere, but found its most significant dimension in the spiritual and especially moral realm. In his words:

Really good scholarship, outstanding art, properly understood morality, even religion conceived in a proper manner, can never lose its contact with suffering individuals and the realistic needs of the masses. Every truly progressive spiritual (*szellemi*) activity satisfies a spiritual need, resolves a pressing concern, or carries forward a progressive tendency.¹²

Even though this particular statement deals specifically with the nature of progress and does so more on the spiritual-cultural rather than socio-economic level, Jaszi still remained committed to progress, but certainly not in a Marxian or even materialist context. He argued that ultimately all progress was nurtured in the human soul and that this was as evident as any of the theorems of Euclid. What he called the creative impulses of the human spirit he saw as the basis of all of world history.¹³ Ultimately, therefore, Jaszi too was a visionary of the creative possibilities inherent in the human spirit and he gradually moved away from the Marxist conception which he had considered necessary in his earlier works. Summing up his critique of Marxism, one may point out that Jaszi eventually expressed it in five statements as follows. First of all, he stated that the Marxist philosophy of history was based upon a simplified set of generalizations about the era of bourgeois revolutions based upon incomplete and inexact information. Secondly, Marx attached undue significance to the class struggle and underestimated the role of social solidarity. Third, Marx's entire conception was mechanically fatalistic and attempted to eliminate the creative

force of the human spirit as a factor in progress. Fourth, in conjunction with this Jaszi asserted that Marx eliminated all true morality from history, making it only a reflection of the class struggle or the so-called “morality” of struggle. Finally, Jaszi stated that the Marxist vision of the future was in turn catastrophic and vague.¹⁴ In place of this, Jaszi developed a vision of liberal and democratic socialism, cleansed of dogmatic elements. However utopian his vision – and Jaszi believed in the creative force of such utopian visions – his belief in progress, especially the progressive realization of the human spirit, remained with him and was the major motif of his historical vision and philosophy.

There are other issues in the writings of Jaszi, as well as statements of the significance of progress in his political tracts and newspaper articles written under the pressure of revolutionary events,¹⁵ which dealt with one or another issue of the philosophy of history, be it a belief in moral progress which illuminated his political and sociological writings, his concern with the extension of modern ideas in a Hungarian context – he once wrote that a new philosophy of history is needed to renew faith in Hungary’s future¹⁶ – or his understanding of the role of great individuals in history,¹⁷ but ultimately I think it is essential to place Jaszi’s concerns in the context of Hungarian intellectual life at the turn of the century. Perhaps a few observations about the pervasiveness of social problems in Hungarian life in the early years of the twentieth century will explain Jaszi’s intellectual development in some manner.

The concern with social thought and the establishment of social reform movements permeated every realm of human activity. Oscar Jaszi posed a whole series of questions about land reform, the nationality issue, the role of sociology in public life, and a critique of the Marxist vision of history from the point of view of bourgeois radicalism; György Lukács opened the way to the social analysis of literature with his writings on modern drama; Bódog Somló and Gyula Pikler combined psychological and sociological observations with the study of public law and jurisprudence; issues of social ills agitated writers such as Endre Ady and Dezső Szabó, churchmen such as László Ravasz and Ottokár Prohászka, Catholic scholars such as Sándor Giesswein, socialists such as Zsigmond Kunfi and Ervin Szabó. One should also recall that Arnold Hauser’s social analysis of art and Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge were also influenced by these same movements of thought and social reform. The list could be extended, even specified and detailed, but the intellectual and cultural milieu of Jaszi was strongly influenced by it.

Out of this maelstrom of ideas emerged some of those concerns which forced thinkers to face up to the ultimate questions, especially those posed most evidently and compellingly by the philosophy of history. On the issues of most concern to human beings the ultimate question is not to what

century one belongs, or one particular thinker such as Jaszi belongs, but rather how one transcends the ever-changing human condition to understand the essence of our very being. Jaszi's vision, however limited by his age and his values, was nonetheless open to this dimension. That is why one can discuss his thought in terms of the philosophy of history.

NOTES

- 1 The philosophy of history has an extensive bibliography. A good introductory account is Bruce Mazlish, *The Riddle of History*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), and a representative selection of readings can be found in Patrick Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1959). The journal *History and Theory* provides a good sampling of contemporary writings, reviews, and bibliographies.
- 2 Jaszi's writings most pertinent to the philosophy of history include the following: *A történelmi materializmus állambölcselete* [The Philosophy of State of Historical Materialism] (2nd ed., Budapest: Grill, 1908); *Marxizmus, vagy liberális szocializmus* [Marxism or Liberal Socialism] (Paris, Magyar Füzetek, 1983, but the work was originally written in 1919); *Kulturális elmaradottságunk okairól* [Concerning the Reasons for Our Cultural Lag] (Budapest: Politzer, 1905); *Művészet és erkölcs* [Art and Morality] (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1908); *Mi a szociológia* [What is Sociology] (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1908); "The Marxian Paradox," in *Democracy is Different; Series of Lectures at Oberlin College* (New York: Harper, 1941), pp. 34–54.
- 3 The relationship of sociology and the philosophy of history was dealt with by Jaszi, *Mi a szociológia*, cited in note 2 and by others, especially István Dékány, *Társadalomalkotó erők* [The Forces of Social Formation] (Budapest: published by the author, 1920), pp. 252–300 and also *A társadalomfilozófia alapfogalmai* [The Basic Concepts of Social Philosophy] (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1933). See also Thomas Szendrey, "Sándor Giesswein, Hungarian Writer, Social Reformer, and Political Philosopher," (unpublished manuscript, 1989).
- 4 Concerning Jaszi's intellectual development the following books proved to be of some interest, even though this writer does not share some of their judgments and conclusions. Attila Pók, ed., *A Huszadik Század körének történetfelfogása* [The Conception of History in the Circle around the Journal *Huszadik Század* – Twentieth Century] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1982); Zoltán Horváth, *Magyar századforduló* [The Turn of the Century in Hungary] (2nd ed., Budapest: Gondolat, 1974); György Fukász, *A magyarországi polgári radikalizmus történetéhez, 1900–1918* [On the History of Hungarian Bourgeois Radicalism] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1960). Of great interest are the recent writings of György Litván, especially his introductory essay to a two volume collection of the writings of Hungarian sociologists, György Litván and László Szűcs, eds. *A szociológia első magyar műhelye* [The First Workshop of Hungarian Sociology] (2 vols., Budapest: Gondolat, 1973).
- 5 Jaszi, "The Marxian Paradox," p. 36.
- 6 Jaszi, *Marxizmus, vagy liberális szocializmus*, pp.20–29 and 103–123.

- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 40–46; Jaszi, “The Marxian Paradox,” p. 47.
- 8 Jaszi, “The Marxian Paradox,” p. 47.
- 9 Jaszi, *A történelmi materializmus állambölcsselete*, pp. 12, 16–18, 166; also Jaszi, *Művészet és erkölcs*, pp. 354ff; Jaszi, “Darwin és a szociológia” [Darwin and Sociology] in Litván and Szűcs, eds., *A szociológia. . .*, vol. 1, pp. 261–266; also in the same volume the article “Herbert Spencer és jövő feladataink” [Herbert Spencer and Our Future Tasks] vol. 1, pp. 359–375.
- 10 Jaszi, *Marxizmus, vagy liberális szocializmus*, pp. 50–62.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.129. (My translation).
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 43, pp. 130–131. Jaszi writes: “In fact, it is possible to go even further and state that world history is nothing more than a constantly recurring struggle for the realization of this ancient spiritual reality.” p. 43. (My translation).
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 47–49.
- 15 This is the case mostly with his journalistic writings. For examples, see György Litván and János Varga, eds. *Jászi Oszkár publicisztikája* [Jaszi’s Journalistic Writings] (Budapest: Magvető, 1982). His perceptive critique of a book about Spengler is reprinted in *Századvég* [End of the Century] (1985, no. 1), pp. 196–201. His faith in progress was reaffirmed in his article written for the first number of the journal *Huszedik Század* entitled “Az új Magyarország felé” [Toward a New Hungary], in Litván and Szűcs, *A szociológia. . .*, vol. 2, p. 416. He wrote as follows: “There are points of time in history, when the less perceptive observer and the man of little faith notes that the cause of progress has failed for some time; but behind the dark chaos of daily events, the rays of light of a new age are already becoming visible.” p. 416. (My translation).
- 16 Jaszi, *Kulturális elmaradottságunk okairól*, pp. 5, 11, 29–30.
- 17 Jaszi, *Marxizmus, vagy liberális szocializmus*, p. 133.