

SYMPOSIUM: DOING JUSTICE TO THE PAST

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Where Is History?

Alan Charles Kors

Historians are at their worst when they try to become meta-theorists of the human condition. Implicitly, and—thanks to the disappearance of humility and shame—so often explicitly, these days, historians are willing to move from a few particulars and a smattering of this or that ephemeral critical theory to pronouncements on matters where, by contrast, contextual historical research could yield useful data on and illumination of other lives at other times and places. It will not be long—I hope—before almost no one will remember Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Althusser, Gramsci, or Lukacs, but people still will want to know about the forms and varieties of human political, social, cultural, and intellectual behavior as it existed, evolved, and was experienced in the diversity of human times, places, and contexts.

Politics may dominate academic life in this generation, but we higher primates have the remarkable trait of curiosity, and historical study, at some level, responds to the desire to hold up the evidence of a human past and regard it from a variety of angles, some of them personal, and, indeed, political, and some of them simply or complexly part of the chain of the human will to know and understand.

It is indeed in *some* sense undoubtedly true that the very *choice* of historical topics itself is biased by matters personal and political, but it is possible for the human spirit, once engaged, to inquire honestly, for knowledge's sake, into a chosen topic. The worst characteristic of academic historians today is tendentiousness, seeing their work as an extension of their politics, and merely looking for evidence, however nonrepresentative, to support what they wish to believe. The excitement of being historians, however, whatever the reason we

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choose a topic, is precisely to be surprised and forced by evidence to modify our deepest views, not only in abandonment of initial working hypotheses but, indeed, contrary to desire, even when personally invested in such views. As Francis Bacon noted in his cautions against “the Idols of the Mind,” we are so prone to error—from the limits of human powers, from individual bias, from the equivocation of our words, from the inveterate flaws of those inherited human theories that we take as nature’s own. To overcome these propensities for self-deception and illusion, we need to guard, above all, against those things we wish to believe, to devise tests of precisely the hypotheses to which we are drawn. In short, we need to let the evidence of the world lead us, to learn from the behavior of the world, and to be skeptical of our own powers and inclinations. We live in an academic age that lacks such humility and self-discipline.

Some would-be scholars today—in the field of so-called cultural studies that seeks to colonize all disciplines of history, for example—claim to be part of a conceptual revolution as fundamental as that embodied in Copernicus or Galileo. They fail to recall that for every one Galileo among subverters of the so-called canon, there were, in the seventeenth century, hundreds of ill-fated systematizers, alchemists, and astrologers whose work led simply to bizarre, if historically interesting, dead-ends. Indeed, the more that we deem our histories to be didactic guides to current human behavior, the greater the danger of our anachronisms, our self-indulgence, and our natural tendentiousness.

The movement into history of generations radicalized or reradicalized by the sixties and its legacies, of ethnic groups previously absent from academic life, and of women with often essential feminist commitments, has introduced new agendas, questions, and perspectives into our discipline. For many, the task of history is now, above all, the recovery of ignored voices, the demystification of power, and the restructuring of our conceptions from new perspectives. For some, the task of history is above all therapeutic and directly political. Such agendas have led, at times accidentally, to works of great value, but, above all, they have led to works of fatuity and agitprop. Nothing human should be foreign to us, indeed, and the subjectivity of choices of topic is a reality of human inquiry. The critical issue is rigor or tendentiousness, pluralism or ideological orthodoxy within fields, honest debate or the use of history for indoctrination.

Let me pause for two cautionary tales for those of us tempted to glorify an academic golden age and to demonize professors of strong radical conviction. When I was an undergraduate in the early 1960s, I took a course at Princeton in American Social History. It was a wonderful course in many ways, focusing on the behavior of small-town Rotarians, congregations, and, as the phrase went, “joiners,” and on what happened to them as the nation urbanized. Halfway through the course, I asked the professor, “Where are the blacks, the Indians, the Chinese building the railroads, the Jews?” He answered, “They aren’t really important. They don’t shed light on what really happened.” I’ve remem-

bered his offhand dismissal when multicultural colleagues are at their worst, railing about the marginalization of minorities.

The second story occurred in a very large course on Modern Europe, taught by an ardent Marxist who provided us with many means to disagree with him. On the day he returned our midterms, he told us that the class had shamed him by only telling him what it thought he wanted to hear. He said, "I'm assigning, for the final, the book with which I most disagree about the twentieth century. I'll not ask you to evaluate it, but to re-create its arguments empathetically and with understanding ... to make sure that you read it with an effort to think from its perspectives." The book was Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, and it changed my intellectual life. It is good that history has opened up to new questions. It is tragic that it has done so with such tendentiousness and such lack of intellectual pluralism and openness.

In less than one generation, the content of journals, the topics of meetings, the voices of historians, and the first-year colloquia of graduate students have changed dramatically. These processes have broadened the scope and perspectives of history, but they have embodied phenomena that now disturbingly plague the profession: theorizing without appropriate criticism or testing, overreaching beyond competence and knowledge, the crude politicization of teaching, and the spread of intolerant political intimidation and litmus tests.

What should be the goals of decent, critical minds that respect academic freedom? First, fields must be defined by subjects and questions, not by theoretical commitments, and certainly not by politics or answers. The history of sex and sexuality, for example, should be open to study from a wholly pluralistic array of perspectives: gender-feminism, sociobiology, class and status analysis, functionalist social theory, free market and rational choice analysis, and a comprehensive "etcetera." The analysis of power, to say the least, is not a radical preserve. Both conservatives and radicals often forget that Mosca, Pareto, and Michels, before Gramsci, and from the Right, sought to demystify and decode the myths by which power justified itself. Historians need intense debates and intellectual competition among a diversity of methodological and interpretive schools and theories.

Secondly, work must be evaluated for its descriptive, analytic, or explanatory power, not for its provenance, and certainly not for its political good faith. Scholars should be most appalled, in fact, by sloppy and self-indulgent work done by historians whose goals and commitments they share. The profession, however, not only is tolerating often egregiously partial and prepossessed work these days for ideological reasons, but it is failing to reward, support, or even tolerate often compelling and insightful work for those same reasons. No one should be subsidizing that behavior. Hiring, tenure, promotion, and peer review should be moments when all of us bend over backwards to be intellectually pluralistic, judging work by its intellectual force, its provocation of vital debate, and its shedding of light on historical phenomena, even if we

ourselves should choose to shed that light from other directions. We have a right to demand probative research, rigorous inquiry, and logical relationship of explanation or theory to data, not to demand ideological, theoretical, or political commitments.

That said, what has gone most wrong, from academic history to the K-12 teaching that comes to reflect it? Intellectually, the most dangerous error made by ideologically driven historians today is to imagine that goodness, wisdom, order, justice, peace, freedom, legal equality, mutual forbearance, and kindness are the *default* state of things in human affairs, and that it is malice, folly, disorder, war, coercion, legal inequality, intolerance, and cruelty that stand in need of purely historical explanation. Historians err grievously in their assumptions of what it is that requires particular explanation in the world. Rousseau and the postmodernists have it all wrong in this domain. It is not aversion to difference, for example, that requires historical explanation—aversion to difference is the human condition; rather, it is the West's partial but breathtaking ability to overcome tribalism and exclusion that demands explanation, above all in the singular American accomplishment. It is the existence and agency of Western values by which that injustice has been and is being progressively overcome that truly should excite our curiosity and awe. Anti-Semitism is not surprising; the opening of Christian America to Jews is what should amaze. Racial aversion and injustice are not the source of wonderment; the Fourteenth Amendment and its gradual implementation are what should astonish. It is not the abuse of power that requires explanation—that is the human condition—but the Western rule of law. Similarly, it is not coerced religious conformity that should leave us groping for understanding, but the forging of the values and institutions of religious toleration.

Most dramatically, of course, it is not slavery that requires explanation—slavery is one of the most universal of all human institutions—but, rather, the values and agency by which the West identified slavery as an evil, and, astonishment of astonishments, abolished it. Finally, the relative pockets of poverty in the West should not occasion our wonder. We used to have different names for almost infinitely worse absolute levels of poverty, namely, “the human condition,” or, more simply, “life.” What we ignore are the values, institutions, knowledge, risk, ethics, and liberties that created prosperity to such a degree that pockets of poverty now draw public attention and the impulse to remediate them. Historians are surprised, thus, in a failure of intellectual analysis, by all of the wrong things, and they lose their wonder at the accomplishments and aspirations of their civilization as a tragic result.

The cognitive behavior of most historians faced with the accomplishments of their own society takes one's breath away. In the midst of unparalleled social mobility in the West, they cry “caste.” In a society of munificent goods and services, they cry either “poverty” or “consumerism.” In a society of ever richer, more varied, more productive, more self-defined, and more satisfying lives,

they cry “alienation.” In a society that has liberated women, racial minorities, religious minorities, and gays and lesbians to an extent that no one could have dreamed possible just fifty years ago, they cry “oppression.” In a society of boundless private charity, they cry “avarice.” In a society in which hundreds of millions have been free riders upon the risk, knowledge, and capital of others, they cry “exploitation.” In a society that broke, on behalf of merit, the seemingly eternal chains of station by birth, they cry “injustice.”

The intellectual manifestation of that pathology is a collective delusion that ignores both history and ethology to seek tendentious demonstration that the most productive human cultures are almost wholly dysfunctional. The Marxists of my youth were fond of denouncing antirealism as “philosophical idealism” when they condemned it in others. It was they, however, who feigned an ideal world of their own spinning. It was they who were always the most antirealist of all. It is fitting, now that historical evidence has taken everything away from them, that their heirs—the anti-Western postmodernists of the cultural Left—should abandon or deny the very notion of reality altogether.

Don’t be fatalistic or despairing about the historical discipline, however. The purest antirealists have fled above all to departments of literature and critical theory. Historians, in principle, remain trained in and tied to archives and to inductive logic and evidence. They still are subject to feeling shame if shown to deny both data and rigorous interpretation. Indeed, they may long for a chance to feel attuned to their earlier training. When I edited the Oxford *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* recently, I invited authors from across the methodological and, indeed, political and ideological spectrums to contribute, and I specifically and explicitly invited them to join a community in which the only crime would be tendentiousness and intellectual unfairness to other, reasonable points of view. I am glad to say that such an invitation elicited, with ease, the best from people. The personal response to my call to authors was gratifying and reassuring in ways I had not anticipated. Indeed, scholars relaxed and seemed to enjoy the experience as of a tribal memory of manners past.

Students still vote with their enrollments. For all of the History of Oppression offered as daily fare, students, when free to choose, seem disproportionately drawn to diplomatic, political, and intellectual history, and they prefer honest teaching and inquiry to indoctrination. I remain worried but hopeful. Do not give up. Win struggles for the critical and honest mind field by field, and discipline by discipline. That is your moral obligation.