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# HORIZONS

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## THE (NOT SO) ROARING TWENTIES?



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# HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

## TRAGIC PAST OR ABSURD PRESENT?

Zoran Čičak

*Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.*

– Karl Marx, 1852

WHEN Karl Marx wrote one of his most famous sentences—almost 170 years ago—he did it in a particular context: discussing the French *coup d'état* of 1851 that resulted in Louis Napoleon assuming dictatorial powers in France. However, the sentence itself survived both the context and the age in which it was written, proving its validity many times over.

Several months ago, when the third decade of the present century began, the relevance of this old Marxist proverb came to the fore once again: it still remains a symbol of the challenge that we carried with us from the previous century. It helps us to ask the following series of questions: *To what extent does the contemporary world remain obsessed with history? Why do people—whether*

*they perceive the world in ethnic, religious, or ideological tribes—so enjoy this new sort of war over old historical narratives? To what extent are ancient myths and legends really assets that might help us win our new battles?*

Indeed, examples were getting all the more numerous as time was passing by: as soon as the international economic crisis hit the European continent and the Greeks rebelled against the German-led austerity agenda in 2014, the media in Athens launched a campaign of cartoons depicting Chancellor Angela Merkel in a Nazi uniform. Then the Poles were more than happy to follow this pattern. Then in 2017 the Catalonia secessionist movement regained its strength, seemingly out of nowhere, and was widely seen as some sort of unfinished job from the Spanish Civil War. In the same manner,

*Zoran Čičak is a member of the Ohrid Group, a Macedonia-focused body comprising eleven international policymakers, diplomats, and scholars, and a member of the NATO Defense College Foundation Senior Advisory Board in Rome. You may follow him on Twitter @zorancicak and blog zorancicak.wordpress.com.*

last year's American presidential elections were perceived as a second Gettysburg—and the South lost its 'cause' once again. Even in the Balkans—that part of Europe that launched this unholy campaign as early as the 1990s—it seems that nobody took a lesson, so to speak, thus leaving the old silly pseudo-historical arguments to run amok in the present era. Witness two events from earlier this year: the first enabled us to witness utterly pathetic Bulgarian claims over Macedonian identity; the second allowed us to see the vindictive expulsion of Serbia's ambassador to Montenegro by a regime that went on to lose an election soon thereafter (for the first time ever, I may add) over a comment the man made about an event that happened more than one hundred years ago.

The World War II era certainly remains a goldmine for all sorts of historical revisionists, as well: every summer, social networks throughout Europe explode in a shallow debate over the importance of the 1938 Munich Agreement and the 1939 Moscow Agreement. Questions are asked by people who are not really interested in anything resembling genuine historical inquiry:

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*Who was the first to collaborate with Nazi Germany—the Western allies or the Soviet Union? Who was the last? Who betrayed the Allied cause more? Partisans of each side are so eager to blame the other; and in their enthusiasm both*

*forget two simple facts: eventually, the war was won; and the war was eventually won because allied nations from East and West came together to win it. If our ancestors behaved in 1941 in the manner we do today, they would have lost that war for sure.*

Even if one takes a step beyond pure politics into the realm of culture, the impact of this war of narratives is visible. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic revived a world-

wide interest in the nightmares of the medieval Black Death. Old books written by people such as Boccaccio, Chaucer, Pepys, Defoe, and Camus became bestsellers again, as if stories about old perils might help us to fight the new ones. The summer of 2020, engulfed by racial discontent in the West, didn't affect only monuments to Confederate rebels in the American South, but ones of Christopher Columbus and Sir Winston Churchill, too. An old and almost forgotten dispute between two celebrities

of the French Left—Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre—over the Algerian war is now being hotly debated among French intellectuals once again. Two historical movies—a Serbian one about the Jasenovac concentration camp set in World War II and a Bosnian one that focuses on an event from the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s—were both candidates for 2021 the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film. Despite treating essentially the same—and timeless—motive of human evil, their respective stories were widely considered as opposite, and their audiences as hostile, to each other. A recently-unveiled monument to an early-medieval Serbian ruler in Belgrade raised a string of old ideological controversies, almost as if all of us recently had entered the thirteenth century instead of the twenty-first.

### PRODUCING AND CONSUMING HISTORY

Winston Churchill is reported to have said in 1945 that “the Balkans produces more history than it can consume.” How does this prophetic remark sound today, given that the proliferation of history has gone far beyond the borders of Balkans?

There are several reasons why the entire contemporary world now appears

to us as more “historicized” than the one in which we were living just a few decades ago. On the surface, one has to take into account the impact of technology that came about in the meantime: once upon a time, in order to encounter

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some history one had to visit a library, or a theatre, or a museum; today, it is enough to visit a few of the countless historical, or pseudo-historical, websites that are just a click or two away. New software makes it much easier to produce a “document”—whatever fake image a user needs can now be easily “produced,” thus claiming its *prima facie* authenticity, which only *post facto* recourse to expertise can credibly deny. In the meantime, a fake historical “source” comes to spread fake history with the rapidity of a mushroom growing in spring amongst millions of internet and social networks users.

However, on a deeper level, we also encounter a serious problem with understanding history itself: it seems as if we indeed believe that history might somehow provide us with additional leverage for claims we raise in contemporary times. We ask questions like: *Who was the first to inhabit some territory? Who came from where? Whose crimes were more heinous? Who collaborated with the Nazis and who sacrificed*

*the most in fighting them? Is it possible to compromise the moral stance of our adversaries by revising the historical credibility of their founding fathers?*

In that respect, such conflicting historical narratives now serve as sort of postmodern weapon employed in warfare over the present and the future, rather than about the past.

An explanation was first given by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who shared Freud’s view that living memory involves the interplay of repetition and recollection, but argued that it operates according to a social rather than a psychological dynamic. It appears that Halbwachs (who was detained by the Gestapo in Paris and died in the Buchenwald concentration camp) indeed sounded prophetic when saying that, in repetition, our memories are not transmitted intact but are rather conflated, as they are continuously being revised. In each repetition of an experience particular idiosyncrasies are worn away. That which is eventually remembered is a reduction of particular memory into an idealized image, or *imago*. Furthermore, memories, while being recollected, are also reconstructed within social contexts. Memories waiting recall are provisional: they become whole only when they are located within the social framework of our present lives. In recollection, we do not retrieve images of the past as they were

originally perceived but rather as they fit into our present conceptions, which are shaped by the social forces that act upon us. Without social frameworks to sustain them, both our individual and collective memories wither away.

Indeed, there is no hill above the Dutch city of Breda where in 1625 Spanish general Ambrogio Spinola Doria received the keys of the besieged fortress from his surrendering Dutch colleague, Justinus van Nassau. The terrain is as flat as a pancake—no hill ever existed—but what we nevertheless stubbornly keep in our mind is a picture, painted only ten years after that event, by Diego Velasquez, the master of Spanish Golden Age. The artistic imagination, in this case, created an idealistic image—an *imago* as Halbwachs defined it.

Later, in a series of famous lectures delivered at the prestigious Collège de France in the mid-1970s entitled “Society Must Be Defended,” Michel Foucault posited that the victors of a social struggle use their political dominance to suppress a defeated adversary’s version of historical events in favor of their own one. He indicated that this sometimes might go so far as “denialism”—sometimes also called “historical negationism”—defined as a falsification or distortion of historical record. Taking an opposite approach in his *The Culture of Defeat: The American South 1865, France 1871, Germany 1918*

(2001), Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues that a defeat is a major driver for the defeated to reinvent himself, while the victor, comfortable in his attitudes and methods yet dissatisfied by the high losses incurred and paltry gains made, may be less creative and fall back.

We are all familiar with numerous examples of this: the Greeks, for example, have preserved the Thermopylae myth for over 2,500 years; the Jewish people have done the same with the myth of Masada; ditto the French with the myth of Roland at the Battle of Roncevaux Pass in 778 and the Serbs with the Kosovo myth rooted in the 1389 Gazimestan battle at which the invading Ottoman sultan was killed as was the defending army led by Prince Lazar. Albeit rooted in historical events, embodied in these myths was the fact that each was, more or less, a clear military defeat. In that respect, myths were of fundamental importance in the making of modern nations, as well as in establishing great transnational ideologies that also sometimes preserve myths of defeats. On this past point, consider that international communism still shares the myth of the 1871 Paris Commune and the anti-fascism the myth of Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

However, if one is to believe Napoléon Bonaparte (one of the few individuals of whom it can truly be said to have made the European past), history is “a series

of lies on which we are in agreement.” This Napoleonic remark leads us to the third reason for our current uneasiness about history: it might be attributed to a growing sense of skepticism about more or less all truths. For instance, Adolf Hitler escaped his fate in a Berlin bunker (and might still be living in some Latin American Neverland); no man has ever stepped foot on the Moon; and, of course, we are all unaware that in fact the earth is flat. The stubborn and often childish wish to mock the very core of human knowledge, sometimes called “a mutiny against the era of political correctness,” in reality reflects a deep feeling of insecurity that postmodern men and women share about very pillars of their existence.

The creation of a historical fact has always been the result of a particular meaning ascribed to a particular event. In a 2018 *New Yorker* essay, Salman Rushdie speaks to this point: “Julius Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon is a historical fact. But many other people have crossed that river, and their actions are of no interest to history. These crossings are not, in this sense, facts.”

Rushdie also reminds us that the passage of time often changes the meaning of a fact. His example is instructive: during the British Empire, the military revolt of 1857 was known as the “Indian Mutiny,” and, because a mutiny is a rebellion against the proper

authorities, that name, and therefore the meaning of that fact, placed the “mutinying” Indians in the wrong. Indian historians today refer to this event as the “Indian Uprising,” which makes it an entirely different sort of fact with an entirely different meaning. The past is constantly revised according to the attitudes of the present.

There is, however, some truth in the idea that in the West of the nineteenth century there was a fairly widespread consensus about the character of reality, as Rushdie reminds us. “The great novelists of that time —Gustave Flaubert, George Eliot, Edith Wharton, and so on—could assume that they and their readers, broadly speaking, agreed on the nature of the real, and the grand age of the realist novel was built on that foundation. But that consensus was built on a number of exclusions. It was middle-class and white. The points of view, for example, of colonized peoples or racial minorities—points of view from which the world looked very different to the bourgeois reality portrayed in, say *The Age of Innocence* or *Middlemarch* or *Madame Bovary*—were largely erased from the narrative. The importance of great public matters was also often marginalized. In the entire oeuvre of Jane Austen, the Napoleonic Wars are barely mentioned; in the immense oeuvre of Charles Dickens, the existence of the British Empire is only glancingly recognized.”

Finally, the passage of time sometimes changes the judgment over a particular historical person or subject. As Miroslav Krleža put it in his 1935 book of essays *Europe Today*, “it is a typical European phenomenon that the greatest European truths were spoken under the gallows, on execution sites, in dungeons and at Golgothas, and those crucified and flooded truths become European flags and last for centuries. Names humiliated as public spittoons, names branded with court verdicts and those of public opinion become European beacons that then shine for centuries.”

#### THE PAST IS A DIFFERENT COUNTRY

However, as L. P. Hartley wrote in the *Go-Between* (1953), “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” Indeed, they do: contemporary Americans, Serbs, Italians, and Chinese have more in common with each other than each of them would have with their respective ancestors in the distant past: if they somehow happened to drop in amongst them thanks to some time machine, each of these time travelers would feel a similar sense of profound disconnect. This is not only about language—albeit we would hardly be able to understand a person from 500 years speaking our own tongue—but also about daily habits, lifestyles, values, traditions, beliefs, superstitions, codes of honors, and dozens of other, seemingly small but important, pieces

of the identity puzzle that, all together, establish what is called in contemporary parlance a “personality.”

We cannot fully understand the motives that moved our ancestors to action, the dilemmas they faced, and the nature and extent of both their fears and hopes—in the same way as they wouldn’t be able to understand ours. It therefore makes no sense to judge them or their actions by the standards that we would today judge ourselves or our own actions: the same historical event

or personage might be judged as either “good” or “bad” depending not only on the side that we take in such a sort of virtual trial, but also on the laws, codes, and moral standards we would apply with regards to the particular case.

Such considerations lead us to pose the next question: does history really exist apart of the dominant historical context? In other words, can history truly be a “neutral” science? Does objectivity always imply “neutrality”? Analytic and critical philosophers of history have debated for ages whether historians should express judgments on historical figures or if this would infringe on their supposed role. In general,

positivists and neopositivists oppose any value-judgment as unscientific.

In 1948, Winston Churchill famously quipped in the UK House of Commons that, “for my part, I consider that

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it will be found much better by all Parties to leave the past to history, especially as I propose to write that history myself.” It might be less known that this was not the first time Churchill had said something similar: he was apparently fond of the idea of actively contributing to the historical narrative for a decade or more,

with various quotations to that effect being attributed to him throughout the 1930s—perhaps earlier.

However, it must be underlined that Churchill was hardly the first one who said something like that; one can also find similar examples in many other languages apart of English. Here are a few examples. During his final Nuremberg days in 1947, Hermann Göring is said to have written in his diary that “*Der Sieger wird immer der Richter und der Besiegte stets der Angeklagte sein*”; in the hours ahead of his execution in 1794, the vanquished Jacobin leader of the French Revolution, Maximilien Robespierre, was

apparently heard exclaiming, “*l’histoire est juste peut-être, mais qu’on ne l’oublie pas, elle a été écrite par les vainqueurs*”; once Emperor Charles V and Prince Andrea Doria reestablished the foreign power in Italy in the early sixteenth century, Giovan Marco Burigozzo, a Lombard shopkeeper and a chronicler of the Duchy of Milan, appears to have written “*La storia di questi avvenimenti fu scritta dai vincitori*.” In examining the past one has to come back to the English-speaking world and a chronicle of the 1746 Battle of Culloden

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in Scotland, where one defeated eyewitness writes with lament that no one will ever know how many members of his clan died on the battlefield because “*it is the victor who writes the history and counts the dead*.”

Nevertheless, it is clear that the phrase “writing history” nowadays has but metaphoric meaning, and it should be interpreted accordingly. In any event, the main corpus of world history (as well as most national ones) was written a long time ago. What we are, however, so eager to claim when talking about “writing history” is the right to interpret it—that is, to provide an authoritative version of historical

facts and their respective meanings. By doing so, what we do claim is not a right to be considered as victors *once upon a time*—when the particular historical event took place—but to be considered as such today—by claiming a right to judge the past ourselves.

However, by distorting and revising historical facts, as well as by accepting such distorted facts, one often causes unexpected consequences; this in turn contaminates a much wider area, both in space and time. For example, when sup-

porting the anti-Russian *coup d’état* in Ukraine in 2014, the West had to accept—no matter how unwittingly—the whole revision of history made by their new allies in Kiev. In just a few years, all sorts of Nazi quislings and collaborators were rehabilitated, their symbols revived, and their life stories re-written: *at the end of a day, these guys hated Russians*—and that was the only issue that mattered for the new elite. The European Union—which was itself created as an embodiment of anti-fascism—pretended it didn’t see what was happening in Ukraine (this distant land, always at the fringe of modernity); but even this didn’t help, either: the process was soon well

underway in the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, and Croatia. And nobody in Europe dared to complain. The right to do so was already forfeited in Ukraine. By the end of the 2010s, wide swaths of Europe were engulfed with a brand-new sort of nationalism: a historical one. Galleries of strange historical persons were marching through internet portals, school textbooks, television shows, and social networks—it was just as Shakespeare’s Ariel said in *The Tempest*: “Hell is empty and all the devils are here.”

In the very same manner in which all the world’s major powers (e.g. the United States, China, Russia, the United Kingdom) remain so proud of their own “national” COVID-19 vaccines, each country suddenly became proud of its own version of “national” history, no matter how much that version contradicted established facts. If, in the former case, the mere fact of having one’s own vaccine somehow conferred lordship over the future, then in the latter one the mere fact of imposing one’s own historical narrative implied lordship over past. History’s nationalism, as much as the vaccine one, both remain intrinsic features of the postmodern world—as if nobody remembers Goethe’s wise exclamation from 1817 that “patriotism ruins history.”

### THE HISTORY OF IDEAS (ARMAGEDDON OF THE TWENTIES)

In 1901, H. G. Wells wrote in *The Sea Lady* that “human history in essence is the history of ideas.” Let’s leave aside, for the moment, all empires, nations, ideologies, and religions to their eternal squabble for importance in world history and take up the topic from another angle. We can ask: is there anything else that matters? Is humanity doomed on this cyclical historical pattern, as it sometimes seems? In-

deed, as Lenin said, “sometimes history needs a push”—but most of the time its course is rather more linear than cyclical. The World Bank tells us that in 2020, world GDP per capita reached \$17,000 for the first time ever; only thirty years ago (in 1990), the same source reminds us, it was barely above \$9,000. The advance of human race—both material and intellectual—is simply something that does not depend on a particular ideological or geopolitical context: it is a feature shared by all in the contemporary world. As French historian Fernand Braudel put it, long-term historical structures and trends—he called it the concept of the *longue durée*—eventually outweigh all short- and medium-term distortions. The world is inevitably becoming a better place for life, no matter whether we are always able to make use of it in an optimal manner.

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What might, in that respect, the upcoming decade reveal is a sort of new balance between two mainstream histories: the particular and the universal one, the history of nations and the history of ideas. Both dominant worldviews of this century—international liberal order and particularistic populism—were seriously challenged by the mayhem of COVID-19. It is likely that both worldviews will continue to struggle over key historical narratives, ones that might help them to win the battle for hearts and minds: technological advancement, the growing power of social networks, and global interconnectedness might become allies of both.

Irrespectively of the aforementioned battle—or, rather, alongside it—the history of ideas will itself continue to unfold. Just as the Black Death in the fourteenth century undermined the very pillars of the medieval order, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged most of the prejudices we took with us from the twentieth century—including Francis Fukuyama’s that History has reached its end with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Black Death led to the liberation of very strong social and material forces, eventually leading to Guttenberg’s printing press, Columbus’

carracks, Luther’s reformation, Kepler’s celestial mechanics, Voltaire’s rationalism, and Robespierre’s revolution. The impact of all these events—the magnitude of change that each separately and all of them together implied—led humanity into the early modern age; and this shift, no matter how slow, was irreversible. In the same manner, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed all the deficiencies of the old order: its narrow-mindedness, inequalities, prejudices, and fallacies. If history is to be believed, the Cartesian impact of such an awareness is inevitable: it might be slow, but it will again be irreversible.

What should be—in this context—the duty of intellectuals? As Erasmus once said, discussing the religious disputes of his age: “by burning Luther’s books you may rid your bookshelves of them, but you will not rid men’s minds of him.” The upcoming decade will certainly have its own intellectuals who will, once again, lend their services—for better or worse, as the case may be—to some cause. No matter if a particular cause is good or bad, national or ideological, or if such service would help or hinder it, such help will often be at the expense of the helper himself. But a serious intellectual should be both able and willing to do more than that.

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Whoever among us—the author and readers of this essay alike—lives long enough to see the end of this decade might come to discover the outcome of the current battle between international liberal order and particularistic populism will be. Most likely, in finding it out, he or she will not need the help of an intellectual: the outcome will be both self-evident and self-explainable. What remains, however, the paramount duty of any serious intellectual—scholar, writer, philosopher, and historian alike—is not necessarily to help this or that warrior, but rather to describe and explain the battlefield.

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There are dozens of issues that, for quite some time, desperately lack modern critical theory and should go beyond simple description: they should go deeper than just weaponizing these in actual social conflicts. For instance: relationships, such as one between the material world and the world of ideas; an individual and a community; freedom and security; production and distribution; democracy and inequality—are all important and challenging enough to be examined and impartially analyzed, outside of dominant frameworks. If all current wars between global narratives constitute the Armageddon of the Twenties, so to speak, then all these issues are its battlefields;

however, they are certainly much more than that—by representing the features of the world we will at some point leave our children to live in.

### A MANUAL FOR CONTEMPORARY HISTORIAN

Therefore, it looks like there still are some common standards for understanding and applying history in

our world—no matter how wide the rifts in our political, ideological, economic, and cultural backgrounds might seem. In this penultimate section, we can try to compose a brief manual for the historian of the 2020s. We

can start by asking: is there anything he or she could do in order to help us leave it with at least a little clearer sense about the past than what we had going into the present decade? For the purpose of this essay, I have tried to summarize all the key advice to be proffered to contemporary historians in ten brief truths:

First, *history is a science*. It is not a product of fiction or wishful thinking and it must be based on a thorough research of historical sources and well as their verification and comparison, in order to establish—inasmuch as possible—precise and verifiable facts: their analysis and synthesis.

Second, *history is dynamic*. Like any other science, history is constantly advancing towards new knowledge, finding new historical sources, and connecting and reinterpreting all. Therefore, a revision of established historical facts is possible, but only as result of new research, as opposed to historical revisionism, which is nothing but manipulation with historical facts in order to serve a particular and already set-in-stone political agenda.

Third, *history is a discipline of critical thinking*. It is not a taboo that serves to enforce national sentiments and disseminate policies of identity by spreading stereotypes and prejudices. It serves to help us check the authenticity of data and recognize manipulations with and abuses of facts about the past.

Fourth, *history is a multiperspective*. Historical facts are established by scientific methodology, but the interpretation of such facts might be different, depending on the perspective from which they are interpreted. This doesn't imply that the past—facts themselves—should be allowed to be relativized or distorted. But it does allow for an area of debate in which all relevant facts

and conflicting opinions about them should be taken into account, without enabling the sanitization of facts and data that do not fit into the dominant worldview of the day.

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Fifth, *history is integral*. The past is not a supermarket, open to everybody to choose what he or she likes and dismiss whatever doesn't fit in the current taste or doesn't seem fashionable. Real history doesn't allow political or ideological selection; or, for that matter, convenient or inconvenient historical periods, states, nations, classes, ideas, movements, and so on.

Sixth, *history is supranational*. It cannot be confined to national, religious, or ethnic boundaries. By treating only ourselves, we're losing the wider picture of the world as much as losing touch with reality. The past is a wide web of interconnected, interdependent, and mutually affecting ties. States, nations, social groups, ideas, and movements were created, developed, and ultimately vanished by virtue of having influenced each other. There is no other way, except in this permanent complexity, to explain the past, understand the present, and envisage the future.

Seventh, *history is contextual*. Both past and present cannot be understood separately, taken outside of the wider context and confined on any particular, and thus isolated, problem. The realities of the past were influenced by a multitude of factors; thus, any attempt at non-contextual interpretation leads to an ultimate distortion of our understanding of the past. This is an issue that is constantly being overcome by cooperation among historians.

Eighth, *history is rational*. It is not a myth, dogma, religion, ideology, or an emotion. It is neither a temple in which we should pray nor a culprit we could accuse of something we dislike—and history is certainly not a football club that needs fans. It is rather like an impartial *post mortem* medical doctor for the past who attempts through his or her investigations to understand and explain it. By doing his or her work properly, the historian teaches us to understand the complexity of the past, and in so doing helps us to both to face the present in a rational manner and envisage options for the future.

Ninth, *history is free*. Like any other science, history can advance only if its

researchers are freed of any external pressures—be they political, ideological, clerical, or economic. There are no progressive or regressive, patriotic or unpatriotic, and honest or dishonest historians—just good and bad ones.

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Tenth, *history is responsible*. The present is constantly being built on certain representations about the past; such representations serve as pillars of our own self-understanding. The architecture of the present is thus endangered if these pillars are insecure—if they are made of non-existent, false, and ill-fitting stones. By putting in our representations of the past events

something that didn't happen, or taking out those that did—by misrepresenting the past—we are creating a false version of events that didn't happen—a collective impression that is misleading. Historians, like all other intellectuals, must be socially responsible because—in this case—the social responsibility at issue amounts to an intellectual one.

**A PROPHET LOOKING BACKWARDS?**

A historian, indeed, might be “a prophet looking backwards” —as Schlegel wrote in 1798. Whether one

adopts a teleological approach to history, as shared by Leibniz (the “principle of sufficient reason”), Hegel (“*Zeitgeist*”), and multiple neo-Hegelians such as Francis Fukuyama; or denies it, as did Nietzsche, Foucault, Althusser, and Deleuze; there is no doubt that past events often fundamentally shape our present ideas, thus indirectly influencing our future lives as well.

However, the men and women of today are not pure straws in the whirlwind of history—they also shape it for those who will come tomorrow. What separates historical discourse from juridical or philosophical discourse is its particular conception of truth—that truth is no longer absolute but the product of a permanent struggle. History itself, which was traditionally the science of a sovereign's deeds—the legend of his glorious feats and building of monuments—ultimately becomes the discourse of the people, thus a political stake, which necessarily inserts a partisan aspect, or partisan claims and counter-claims, to the narrative. In the previously cited lectures, Foucault reminds us that the subject can no longer be seen as a neutral arbitrator—a judge or legislator, as in (he says) Solon's or Kant's conceptions. History as it is understood today is simply unable to judge human beings—their actions

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and their opinions—in the way Hegel meant when he quoted a line from Schiller's 1786 poem “Resignation” that “World History is a tribunal that judges the World.” Therefore, Foucault maintains, what became the “historical subject” must search in “history's furor,” under or below the “juridical code's dried blood,” for what he calls the multiple contingencies from which

a fragile rationality can temporarily emerge.

And yet we now face a genuine dilemma. As Rushdie writes, “how can we argue, on the one hand, that modern reality has

become necessarily multidimensional, fractured, and fragmented, and, on the other hand, that reality is a very particular thing, an unarguable series of *things that are so*, which need to be defended against the attacks of, to be frank, the *things that are not so*, which are being promulgated by, let's say, the Modi Administration in India, the Brexit crew in the UK, the [now former] President of the United States?” And of course, to this list we could add the Eastern European populists, Brazil's Bolsonaro and his supporters, and a whole host of others. This question in turn raises several others.

For instance, we can ask, with Rushdie: “how to combat the worst aspects



of the internet, that parallel universe in which important information and total garbage coexist, side by side, with, apparently, the same levels of authority, making it harder than ever for people to tell them apart?”

And we can also ask, also following Rushdie: “how to resist the erosion in the public acceptance of ‘basic facts,’ scientific facts, evidence-supported facts about, say, climate change or inoculations for children?”

Further still, we can pose, with Rushdie this question as well: “how to combat the political demagoguery that seeks to do what authoritarians have always wanted — to undermine the public’s belief in evidence, and to say to their

electorates, in effect, ‘believe nothing except me, for I am the truth’?”

And so we come to the final question: what, specifically, might be the role of the humanities in general and history in

*The COVID-19 pandemic revealed all the deficiencies of the old order: its narrow-mindedness, inequalities, prejudices, and fallacies.*

particular, in countering all this awfulness?

In that respect, what Rushdie in that same essay wrote about truth in general might be said about historical truths in particular: “I do think

that we need to recognize that any society’s idea of truth is always the product of an argument, and we need to get better at winning that argument. Democracy is not polite. It’s often a shouting match in a public square. We need to be *involved* in the argument if we are to have any chance of winning it.”