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Focus: Historians and moral judgements

Introduction

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This Focus addresses the relationship between historians and the societies they serve, particularly since the later nineteenth century when, for the first time, historians began to define themselves as a distinct professional group. One of the conclusions that emerges from the four case studies pursued here is that the independence of judgement which professionalism implies, founders the moment it is perceived by a wider public that historians are no longer providing them with the moral guidance they expect from those who have studied their pasts. It is also shown that the challenges and responses did not prove identical in any two sets of circumstances. This introduction also makes reference to general challenges to which individual contributors do not necessarily refer, but which have impacted on the work and independence of all historians.

Historians, both now and in the past, have been aware that what they write is, of necessity, influenced by their personal circumstances as also by their political and social preferences. Perhaps out of recognition of this, some writers of history in all centuries, and possibly from every culture, have celebrated their ability to shape policy in the present by citing experiences from past times. Then, in the nineteenth century, as governments in the west established Public Record Offices, National Archives and National Libraries, it came to be accepted in that part of the world that historians were professionals who, having undertaken a prescribed course of training, were uniquely equipped to assess how politicians and diplomats in the past had conducted their business.

This privileging of institutional evidence fostered the notion that historians were now scientists rather than polemicists, which also implied that what they wrote was more scientific than creative. The brief of these self-assured historians was the study of western governments in action, both in their dealings with each other and in their encounters with the wider world; the laboratories of these

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historian scientists were the depositories that governments had put at their disposal; and their responsibility was to narrate how nation states had come into being, and how they had expanded their authority both within Europe and outside that continent. Then, when it came to dealing with contentious issues such as the causes of war, or the relative advantage that accrued to the various parties to peace treaties, historians were expected to formulate balanced conclusions based upon a detached weighing up of the evidence that had been put within the reach of all qualified scholars.

Many philosophers, already in the nineteenth but more so in the twentieth century, raised objections to the pretensions of historians to arrive at objective scientific understandings of what had motivated politicians in the past. However, it took the reality of two world wars and a multitude of successful and unsuccessful nationalist uprisings against established authority to erode the credibility of the claims of historians to be the impartial judges of unbiased evidence. The first real challenge to the established historians of nation states came from rivals of the left who, in all Western Countries but especially in France and Britain, gained increasing respectability during the interwar years and secured a significant foothold within the academy following World War II. Their methodological objection was that historians of high politics were essentially institutional historians who used only the limited range of evidence preserved in official archives and had scant understanding of the way in which economic and social factors had influenced the choices made by those whose behaviour was their subject of study. All on the left espoused interest in the formation of class rather than nation, and they addressed problems that could be best investigated over time and place rather than through the close study of events in any one privileged place or period. Then those who embraced Marxist models (a stance that was to become mandatory for historians functioning under Communist regimes) abandoned the previous obsession of historians with issues of motivation on the grounds that the courses of action that people in the past, as in the present, had chosen to pursue were determined by economic and social conditioning. At the same time, historians who had taken an interest in Freudian psychology also discounted the significance of choice since they proceeded from the assumption that the actions and decisions of their historical actors had been largely dictated by experiences from childhood.

These irreconcilable presuppositions led to sometimes memorable and frequently bitter debates within academic institutions of the Western World, and especially between historians of left and right. Ultimately the only grounds over which the contesting parties could agree (and this only after it became generally known in the west that the atrocities perpetrated by the Stalinist regime equalled those of Hitler in their malevolence and inhumanity) was that all narrative history, whether of nation or class, was biased and judgemental since it provided an

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unquestioning endorsement of the predetermined destinies to which the various narratives were directed. In addition, as attention was drawn to an ever-increasing range of evidence that shed light on the lives of people in the past, and as questions were raised concerning the major groups who had been given no place in previous official narratives (here the poor, the victimised, women, and entire populations of non-European origin come especially to mind) historians began to despair of their ability to comprehend all the evidence that was at their disposal, much less to interpret it.

Under these circumstances, the writing of grand narratives came to be regarded as unprofessional and the charge of being teleological was as serious as being accused of being an amateur or of endorsing the regimes that had been responsible for the atrocities of past times. Some, especially historians of high politics, believed their primary function to be that of exposing, through the empirical study of what had happened over short interludes of time, the fallacies in the received wisdom that had come down to them through the grand narratives. Others gained confidence that they could supply valid, but snatched, glances into the past through the scrutiny of the entire range of evidence that had survived from particular moments and particular places and through their mastery of an ever-increasing range of skills (drawn from a wide span of disciplines) required to appraise that evidence.

Such developments meant on one level that historians were engaged more in advancing knowledge through refutation rather than through accretion. At the same time, others become confident of their ability to produce pictures from the past that were truer than any previously constructed. The successes they registered (and not least the success in reaching staggeringly large audiences with the published imaginative micro-studies) convinced historians that they could aspire to be impartial and objective, even when they accepted that such qualities were beyond human attainment, and that they could escape being judgemental since what they were about was to enable their readers to view episodes from the past through the mental eyes of those who had lived through the experiences they discussed. Academic historians were also as concerned as their predecessors to achieve an impartial pose by refraining both from selecting heroes and villains and from passing moral judgement on past episodes.

Boosted by these fresh achievements, historians began to assume carefully chosen poses, and the most dedicated *poseurs* were the writers of national history, because their preferred genre had been especially besmirched by the chauvinism of the authors of previous generations. However, the stances being taken by historians of nations were soon imitated by those working on a broader canvas, not least because historians of European colonization gained the confidence that they, more than their predecessors, could empathise with the vanquished as well as the victors in these encounters. This fresh confidence, which gave rise

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successively to a variety of New Histories, including the New Economic History, the New Social History, and New British History, soon gave way to renewed doubt concerning the methods and function of historians, and for a variety of reasons. Prime among these was the continued expectation by political figures, and the wider public, that historians would provide school pupils with a civic education located within a national or even a European framework. Equally important was the use of well-known historical episodes or characters as subjects for film history, which historians welcomed because film makers could achieve verisimilitude more effectively than historians could ever hope to do, but which they also distrusted because of the concerns of film producers to pass judgement on past events, even at the expense of playing hard and fast with established facts in order to achieve the desired effect. And third, and perhaps most disturbing, was the emergence of a new genre of TV history, whose producers sometimes employed well-known historians, some of whom proved themselves all too ready to structure their programmes about the well-known teleological narratives that were considered necessary to retain a viewing public from one programme to the next.

This Focus provides scholars with the opportunity to explain how four different groups of historians, each expert on highly emotive subjects, have coped with the changing attitudes of historians to the passing of moral judgement on the issues they discuss.

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