

Historical Practice and Responsibility

François Bédarida

We are frequently asking ourselves today about the role of the historian in a rapidly changing world. Some expect the past provide them with an explanation or a justification of the present. Others search in history for the basic roots of identity or even for keys to the future. More than ever we are being faced with what Lucien Febvre perceived to be the social function of the historian: "to organize the past as a function of the present." From this arises a responsibility toward society, as the knowledge that is being produced gains its authenticity through being stamped as officially "scientific." Faced with the expectations of society and the attention of the public, the historian has been called upon to disentangle events and to furnish a guiding thread, frequently by blending his role as a critic with a civic and an ethical one. Even when we are not dealing with the attempt to set up the historian, through an appeal to his great expertise, as the licensed sage in town, it must be stressed that assuming the rostrum in response to the questions of the time is provided that the rules of the discipline are strictly adhered to—perfectly legitimate in that it provides history with significant depth.

For all that, some of the great names of historical writing testify to the manifold ways in which historians have intervened in the public space—from de Tocqueville to Palacky, from Croce to Marc Bloch, not to mention Mommsen of whom it might be said that for him the writing of history was merely the continuation of politics by other means! True, we can assert, as Ranke did in his 1836 inaugural lecture, that the study of history and the advance of knowledge, instead of improving the conduct of human affairs, has had negative as well as positive effects. But in reality, history primarily produces questions rather than answers.

Today these questions reinforce all the more the notion that our age is marked by the disintegration of certainties and the collapse of ideologies and that to the crisis of the philosophies of history must be added an explosion of historical knowledge in the wake of an extension of the historian's territory into new fields until now unexplored. However well the historian may be attuned to the world around him, he treads a narrow path between the two contradictory missions that he has been asked to fulfill. On the one hand, he must dissociate himself from those myths that exist in the common mind and from the deformations of collective memory so that he can juxtapose them with a demystifying discourse that is both supported by evidence and rational. On the other hand, as a person who builds and diffuses knowledge he must contribute to the shaping of the historical conscience and the memory of his contemporaries. To put it differently, his being a social actor is inseparable from his being a researcher.

This is why the public frequently calls on him to be an arbiter and authority, recognizing in him his position as a mediator between past and present. In this respect we need merely look at the great historiographical controversies involving large national stakes that have recently taken place in Germany (the clash known as *Historikerstreit*, with its scholarly, political, and moral implications), in France (the case of the 200th anniversary of the Revolution or the current debate on Vichy), or in Italy (where the question of the nature of fascism and its place in the country's history as well as its present resurgence remains a burning issue).

However, if history-as Huizinga has maintained-is a means for society to gain an understanding of what it represents-in its texture as well as its movement-it is still necessary for historiographical construction to respect two basic criteria if we want to avoid its instrumentalization in the nebulous realm of mythologies and propaganda. First, a coherent and explicative relationship between the sources and the referential reality whose indices are the mark; and second, a knowledge gained according to a controlled scientific method and appropriated to its object by following a logic of intelligibility and communication.

It is for these reasons that the responsibility exercised by the historian in his own proper sphere is based on two conditions.

There is first of all independence, be it political or intellectual, social or financial; this is the exigency of liberty. Second, there is the scrupulous and meticulous respect of the canons of the discipline; this is the exigency of truthfulness.

With respect to liberty, the connections between history and power are more complex than they appear at first glance—and not just because next to the power of the state we must also reckon with that of the market, of institutions, and of fashions. True, at all times the political powers have tried to either control or to influence historical writing. But in an inverted sense the historian himself possesses a formidable authority, i.e., that of shaping and legitimizing today's historical consciousness and tomorrow's memory. We all know Chateaubriand's immortal and invigorating warning in his diatribe against Napoleon's despotism:

When, in the silence of degradation one merely chooses to retain the chains of slavery and the voice of the informer; when everything trembles in the face of the tyrant, and when it is as dangerous to gain his favors as it is to incur his disgrace, the historian appears on the scene, mandated by the vengeance of the people. It did not help Nero to be successful; Tacitus had already emerged under the empire ...

Where can we find a finer demonstration of the historian's cathartic role? But was Chateaubriand, who himself was subjected to imperial wrath, correct in adding: "If the historian's role is a good one, it is often dangerous"; he must have "an intrepid character" and be "prepared for the worst"? Let us remember that the liberal de Toqueville, speaking in 1852 a few months after Napoleon's coup d'état of 2 December during his annual address before the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, thought it prudent to suppress a damning reference to the brutal closure of this institution by Napoleon I. As to the twentieth century, it too provides many examples of bent backs and timid spirits. In short, the independence of the historian is a *sine qua non* of his being able to pursue his profession and this freedom must extend to both his ability to communicate and to produce knowledge.

At the same time, to the extent that historical understanding is, in Carlo Ginzburg's words, always an understanding that is "indirect, indicated, and conjectural," it lends itself, consciously or unconsciously, to the whole gamut of distortions, if not to breaches

of the truth. Let us not speak here of the most flagrant falsifications in the manner of the so-called "revisionists" who deny the genocide of the Jews or of Stalinist specialists in the rewriting of the past (including the top echelon of government, even after a recent biography of Beria revealed that it was he who, in a book entitled *On the History of the Bolshevik Organization in the Transcaucasus*, inaugurated the shift of Soviet historiography into the realm of fiction).

For all this, the manipulation of history is an art that has existed at all times. Voltaire, in casting doubt on a history "completely permeated by fables," mocked the absurd stories that were called "history" in Herodotus, Sueton, Tacitus as well as their successors in the Christian era (to mention only Gregory of Tours, "our Herodotus"). In the modern period, the abuse of evidence proliferated, starting with Augustin Thierry's ingenious admission that he was looking in historic narratives for arguments that supported his convictions; or with Treitschke's view that history can be used as a weapon for achieving a political objective, or the I.R.A. radical's statement after an assassination: "History is on our side." Yet the range is very wide between the poison of intellectual deception and the more or less arbitrary and fallacious reconstructions of the past.

It also happens that once every so often a historiographical debate hinges on suspicion if not intentionality. Thus the hypotheses that Fritz Fischer presented in his famous book of 1961 on the origins of World War I were denounced by a well-regarded historian like Gerhard Ritter as being politically dangerous for the historical consciousness of German youth. In a more subtle way and in the name of "critical history," Michael Stürmer has more recently exhorted German historians, working in a society haunted by the memory of its culpability, to anchor patriotism in a positive view of national history by way of developing a sense of identity with the past and of building a consensus with regard to values that overcome political divisions. As he put it, "in the land without history, the future is controlled by those who determine the content of memory, who coin the concepts and interpret the past." Still, if one scrutinizes more closely such an apparently laudable aim, does one not also discern its actual ambiguities and its potential for drifting off into treacherous waters?

It is for this reason that it is better to return to the rules of historical practice, to proven rules that lay down both the regulatory and the structuring role of historical knowledge. As Michel de Certeau has so well demonstrated, history, while being a discourse that uses narrative figures, is defined by a scholarly practice based on a "set of rules that allow the 'control' of procedures that are commensurate with the production of the defined object." These rules are those of the critical method first developed in the seventeenth century and later reformulated in the nineteenth. The procedures consist of working out the sequences between the divergent components of the object of study, following the collection, dissection, and critique of the body of available documents. Ultimately this object, whatever its character, invariably is left for the historian to construct. In this sense, historical practice is a scientific one, composed of elements that are falsifiable and controllable, even if it is dependent on the social locus in which it takes place; for it is a function of this locus within society and of this milieu of study that the problematic is being defined, that the stakes are being circumscribed, and the interpretations constructed.

Thus, without minimizing in the slightest the subjective dimension in the work of the historian—it is understandably important to reaffirm, tirelessly, that history must be as objective as possible, even knowing that such an objectivity is never truly attainable, rather than be led astray in the meanderings of post modernist deconstructions. We must choose between scholarship and fiction. What responsibility would remain for the historian if history were merely representation and discourse, as Nietzsche asserted; if there were no truth, but only interpretations? In a universe from which the fixity of the past is banished in favor of an "unassailable relativism" and where history rejoins literature, on what foundations could a future be prepared? In the name of an extreme historicism, post modernism in reality removes all interest in historical research unless it is admired as a brilliant rhetorical exercise. Such skepticism—one might even say nihilism—leads purely and simply to a negation of knowledge, as the latter finds itself reduced to a contingent and arbitrary discourse, an illusion even.

It is from this point that we come back to the need for truthfulness that the historian, instead of minimizing, must proclaim very

clearly to be his lode-star. It is a star that is distant, transient, occasionally veiled by clouds, but without it, what could the notion of responsibility be based on? It is true that at this level one enters the realm of values and that a connection between history and ethics is established. But can ethics and responsibility be separated by a watertight partition? Let us moreover note the changes of the *Zeitgeist*. After the radical critique of the 1960s, which destroyed the certainties, buried the utopias and disassembled the beliefs, one has since the 1980s witnessed a return to the values of humanism, morals, and meaning. To be sure, historians have their part in that recasting of intellectual life. They must continue to confront the imperatives of the present.