

# Scholarship and the Responsibility of the Historian

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We can hardly know for certain how strongly a scholarly discipline like history is able to affect politics and society, popular views and morals. Whatever its impact, it's influence also varies from epoch to epoch. During a few decades of the nineteenth century, historians were overwhelmed by so many questions and by such high expectations that there existed a large public space for them that they merely had to occupy. At other times, they have had to conquer this space first if they wanted to gain continued attention.

To be sure, a differentiation has to be introduced: any society has particular interests, e.g., in parts of its more recent past or in events that society sees as having something like a "mythical quality" about them, events that represent a major divide, that are deeply imprinted on that society's memory, that have attained a special role through tradition. There is, of course, always a space commanding wider public attention for these aspects. However, they are no more than small specks on the large canvas of history.

Still, however receptive the public may be to the historian's work, it is safe to assume that historical scholarship *can* have influence. Ideas, views, and opinions are being formed—among politicians, journalists, and entire societies—on the basis of instruction in school, of the reading of history books and other traces left by historical scholarship. The self-images of entire societies, the claims of nations, the perception of other nations, but also the conviction that a particular order is the right one or that societal conditions are problematical as well as a myriad of other factors, are derived, inter alia, from history, from a history that is rather more accurately interpreted at certain times and misinterpreted at others.

Historical scholarship can play an enhancing or an inhibiting role in this process; it can be useful or can cause damage, and will do so intentionally or inadvertently. Historical scholarship can offer too much or too little, it can be either too verbose or too taciturn with regard to questions that happen to be topical; naturally, it can also be too accommodating or too reserved toward certain contemporary trends. Historical scholarship can miss out on fighting myths, misunderstandings, and errors, and can fail to counter falsifications. But it can also direct the public's attention to what has been forgotten or repressed. Historical scholarship can thus be the source of many influences remain mute.

During the 1960s a violent debate raged in the Federal Republic of Germany on whether the German Empire's share of responsibility in the outbreak of World War I was very much higher than had been assumed. In this case the results of historical research have badly shaken the image of a "good" and "decent" pre-1933 Germany to which the Germans so much liked to cling after the horrendous crimes of the Nazi period. And the opposition was accordingly vigorous. The public became strongly involved. The doubts about Bismarck's work had by then become so powerful that the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the German Empire could not be celebrated in 1971. Later, a peculiar connection sprang up between new interpretations of the Bismarckian empire on the one hand, and the change of parliamentary power in Bonn on the other. Yet another turn in events occurred in 1989. The debate on the extermination of the European Jews and other groups was particularly heated in the wake of the film "Holocaust" in 1979; but the debate was also conducted in the general public independently of this film and with varying intensity throughout the postwar period, with historians playing a prominent part in it. It was an involvement that had manifold consequences-extending as far as the *Historikerstreit* of 1986/88 which was extraordinarily passionate and whose repercussions can be felt to this day. Other examples could be cited from other countries.

Historiography, moreover, has access to a myriad of human experiences, of varieties of political and social life, action, suffering, conservation, and transformation. It can use them to "test" the most diverse sets of questions; it can conduct a kind of retro-

spective experiment and draw from this an array of conclusions that may have far-reaching consequences.

All this supports the notion that the historian must give an account of the possible effects (or non-effects) of his work; that he must ask himself above all, what kinds of obligations toward his time grow from his knowledge and his opportunities, or to put it differently, from his vocation.

This question becomes all the more urgent owing to circumstance that some people like to advance against the actuality of historical scholarship, i.e., that the age in which we live has become far removed from all history and that this distance is growing all the time because of ever more rapid change. This is frequently illustrated by reference to the fact that the number of the living is larger today than that of all who have ever died. But it is precisely the relative distance of the present from (nearly) all things past that is responsible for the extraordinary degree of our lack of orientation. This carries with it great risks at the same time, as everything is in a state of flux. If there is no intervention things will not stay as they are, but they will change without there being any possibility of control. On the one hand, a huge number of things—even genes—appear to becoming under human control; on the other hand, the effects and side-effects of these actions turn into processes which are not easy to completely master; and the changes that result from this are meanwhile capable of calling into question essential preconditions of human life on earth for some time to come.

All kinds of different rules and axioms fail. For many things that require urgent attention there exist as yet no rules and axioms.

If this is so, then the historians, like other scholars, must ask themselves whether they have a contribution to make toward providing an orientation in the present, in particular, and overall. The conclusions that the various participants in the present age draw from this are in the end, of course, of a political nature, not a scholarly one. But much has already been gained if the problems we face are at least better known and if material is made available that helps to make it easier to come to a judgment.

What was implied by the old maxim—*historia magistra vitae*—was that politicians could learn from history and apply this to

their policies in a world scarcely confronted with structural problems. A second motif of ancient historiography was to make it easier for readers to bear fateful setbacks; to bear up under history. As indicated above, the contribution of historical writing seems to lie today in providing orientation within a large variety of problems and connections. Historians are by no means the only ones charged with this task; but they can presumably make a contribution that no other person can so readily provide.

In short, the historian does have a responsibility; it is a responsibility toward his contemporaries and future generations, to whom this world will one day be given over. It is, by the way, also a responsibility toward the dead, but this is a problem that will be put aside here.

This responsibility may be defined—as always in such cases in terms of an “as-if”—as if much depended on the individual in his field and indeed in fields considerably removed. Without overestimating ourselves, we must nevertheless act as if our own actions do make a difference.

The next question to ask is what are the consequences if this responsibility is taken seriously. In this context we shall have to ignore what the individual may deem necessary on the basis of his historical work, though not without its framework, for example in politics, in partisan organizations, in the shape of a large variety of recommendations and statements. Such activities are a personal matter; they transcend scholarship. To be sure, in individual cases they may be difficult to separate from a person’s scholarship, and it works in both directions: practice is of course also reflected in scholarship, just as scholarship in some way tends to influence practice. However, our task here is merely to define what basic rules might be established for history as a scholarly discipline. I would differentiate here between three aspects:

- 1) The scholarly work of the individual in teaching and research;
- 2) The general orientation of teaching and research in history as a discipline;
- 3) The ways in which one turns toward the more general public.

## **The Individual's Scholarship in Teaching and Research**

Leopold von Ranke once took the view that scholarship must intervene in life. This he thought to be unquestionably true. However, in order to have an effect, historiography above all had to be a science. "We can," he wrote, "have a true impact on the present only if we disregard the latter for the moment and elevate ourselves to free, objective science." I would consider this to be fundamentally correct, even if we may have doubts about the extent of objectivity that we can achieve.

"Disregarding the present" may merely mean, however, that the practical interests the historian pursues in the present should not influence his work. His theoretical, observing interests, on the other hand, may certainly be geared toward the present, because he learns from his age which makes certain questions, for example, more accessible to him; and it is these that in turn enable him to decipher the period that he looks at, not least some of its peculiarities.

All historical work draws on the present at least for its language; moreover, current language is being used to distinguish between what is and is not self-evident, which in turn determines the discourse in different ways. Finally, there are questions, views, examples and other things. Ideally and over time the experience of very diverse epochs-whether martial or peaceful, stagnant or dynamic, stable or revolutionary, etc.-should accumulate. What is more likely to happen, however, is that each generation makes a fresh start.

In any case, historians tend to be closer to certain historical epochs, and more remote from others, on account of the quality of their own epoch. This becomes particularly clear *ex post facto* and with the benefit of hindsight. Much of what is conditioned by the present in historical research appears to be unconscious, and there is hence always the danger of falling victim to certain contemporary trends.

I would like to assert that the responsibility of the historian demands that he observe his own epoch *very consciously*. This enables him, on the one hand, to approach with more distance and hence more critically the insinuations that offer themselves

through the experiences of his age; on the other hand, conscious observation multiplies the cognitive gains that can be made. Finally, it enables him to test, in reference to historical topics, questions that emerge from the present and thus to explicate them more clearly, in the hope of perhaps also making a contribution to an understanding of the present.

Thus the interest in micro-history that has emerged from certain very specific contemporary experiences in our time and its needs can also open up many topics from more distant periods. The temptation in this case is that we elaborate on differences between the present and the recent past not just in the individual case, but also with regard to the whole. In this way the problem gets caught up in broader contexts. If we take this approach, it is likely to happen that we encounter the question of the relationship between micro- and macro-history, and this may be very different from one society to another, simultaneously posing the challenge to look at the peculiarity of the modern situation with fresh eyes.

To give a second example: the modern question of what constitutes the collective identity of societies, e.g., of nations, opens up the peculiarities of the "identity of the citizen" if applied to ancient Athens. If we then compare the two concepts, we can make observations that may be the starting-point for further reflections in matters of "identity" and its modern problematic. Citizens' identity was rather a closed idea, that assumed a far-reaching homogeneity among the citizenry, while at the same time promoting this sameness. National identity is determined by the fact (and also occasionally very susceptible to the fact) that it tries to bridge many profound differences and antagonisms in a society that as a whole is also very much larger than its Athenian counterpart. It was part of the citizens' identity to be largely focused on the present. National identity, by contrast, is often linked to expectations for the future and, indeed, of progress, and it is perhaps also for this reason that it is more and more firmly grounded in some more distant past. At the very least national identity has a lot to with history and with the formation of historical myths. It would be intriguing-and topical-to ask to what extent the value of work that is often very differently assessed has a place in this view of identity that is also partly its own justification.

To cite a third example: this is the observation that different parts of the world, but increasingly Europe as well, are experiencing a weakening of the power with which state authority penetrates societies; Mafia organizations proliferate as partial structures of domination. These developments are not only reviving an interest in many characteristics of the early modern period, of the middle ages, and of antiquity, but may also provide an incentive to think more deeply and-by reference of historical analysis-about the preconditions of state authority as well its functional equivalents during other ages. How can a functioning political unity be generated? How can it secure, beyond and above particularist interests, the unity of the formation of the political will; and how can it assert this will? How can this be done if, on top of it all, we have the granting of manifold liberties, possibly even within a democratic framework?

If I may mention two details from my own work, such questions can even throw new light on Greek and Roman history. My starting point is a rough differentiation between two kinds of "solidarity"-one horizontal and the other vertical. "Vertical solidarity" refers to relationships between those "upstairs" (usually politicians) and those "downstairs." The latter support the former in order secure the formers' power. In return those "upstairs" grant personal advantages to those "downstairs." This is a relationship in which particularist interests are being served above all. Looking at the whole of world history, this appears to be an almost natural situation. If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Everyone gains something. The question is how common interest may be defended in these circumstances.

The Roman Republic was permeated in thousands of ways by "vertical solidarities"; or to be precise, by clientelism. These solidarities were complemented by friendships among more or less equals. The practice of noble rule was the essential element. However, within the nobility (within the Senate, to be exact) we can observe strong elements of a "horizontal solidarity" that to some extent took the vertical solidarities into their service, and in any case restricted their impact. There existed in this respect a certain discipline, a strong capacity to reach a consensus, that was buttressed institutionally. Attican democracy, on the other hand, succeeded in virtu-

ally excluding vertical solidarities. Horizontal solidarity was so powerful here that the unity of the polis was in fact based on the solidarity of its broad strata of citizens. There was a mutual agreement to defend and preserve certain common interests.

If we turn this question around and apply it to our age, it becomes very clear that modern democracies (and societies) cannot function, inside and outside the parties, without manifold vertical solidarities. Certain elements of modern statehood—the legacy of the absolutist monarchies—may still act as a counterweight up to a point. But the more these elements are removed, the more we face the question of how far they can be countered by horizontal solidarities, how far as a consequence of this our democracies will be pressed to provide even greater supports.

There is no space here to go into this. Nor is it impossible that such observations might be reached on quite different paths. But in my judgment there is much to be said for the assumption that the means of human cognition are limited, and that we must hence exploit every opportunity to augment them. To reiterate, what applies here is the “as-if.”

These and many other questions can influence and enrich historical work in many different ways. For instance, to stay with my example, when applied in connection with the political order of Rome or Athens or certain phases of their histories. But they can also be the stimulus for larger projects, for entire books.

Thus one of the fundamental treatments of “Greeks and Barbarians,” the subject of Julius Jüttner’s 1923 study, represents, as the author remarks in his preface, a response to the experience of World War I, to the “shameful fact ... that the outbreak of hostilities among the nations killed at a stroke all sense of human solidarity and generated a flaming hatred among some that could not do enough to denigrate the enemy.”

It is conceivable that today the problem of the great migrations (the emergence and growth of minorities that cannot be assimilated or are unwilling to assimilate) may stimulate fresh research. Here, too, questions that have been opened up by the present lead to observations relating to Greek democracy. In general terms it may be said that the more democratically a city was organized, the more carefully it watched over keeping the circle of citizens



small and sealed from the outside world. How far is democracy therefore dependent on "homogeneity?" I shall leave aside the questions that follow from this question. Nor is it possible to answer modern questions by using antiquity as one's starting point. And yet it seems plausible that we may be able to throw additional light on these questions if we approach them from the perspective of ancient history; that by studying them it becomes possible to formulate them more sharply. Once again the difference between polis and nation would have to be considered, in addition to the difference between old and new nations in the modern period and perhaps also in addition to the problem of a Europe that is growing together. I do not wish to maintain that by doing this even late antiquity may turn out to be a topical subject; however, it is not completely without interest in the broader (!) context of these questions.

And finally, the theme of "violence," of its genesis and of the preconditions of fighting it, may assume a completely new aspect from the perspective of our time. Detached historical contemplations could, in turn, facilitate observations that may be capable of contributing to our current understanding of violence, and the problem of "horizontal solidarity" would have to be given prominent consideration in the process. It is an odd experience that nevertheless forces itself upon you with regard both to the history of science and to the present state of science: if there is a strong cognitive interest that is guided by the present, the questions with which one approaches history are also different.

No doubt this gives rise to the danger that a subject is wrongly turned into something topical. But this danger will be lessened the more we are conscious of these questions and of our own present. There is also the danger that interested laymen in politics and the media will try to use historical insights for their purposes. The more topical these insights are, the more tempting this will be. This will be inevitable. But in this respect, too, I would like to assert that reflecting upon the historian's responsibility offers the best antidote. The more a discipline insists on this responsibility, the more difficult it will be to pursue political tendencies within the context of science. The yardsticks must be clear. And the international scientific community will see to it that these yardsticks will be adhered to.

## **The General Orientation of Research and the Discipline of History**

Second, responsibility toward the present seems to make it imperative that the scholarly discourse among historians must undergo change, or to be more precise: the ways we give attention to divergent potential topics and the ways in which access to the subject is regulated for college and high school students.

I am afraid that we will not be able to organize our living together into a more forcefully united Europe and on a planet that has become very small if we, i.e., the members of the different nations, do not know more about each other. To begin with, the task is to create in historiography above all, but not only in this field, preconditions for the development of an "intercultural competence." We must clarify our thoughts to a much larger degree than we have done so far about the images that we have about each other; and this invariably involves referring to history. But we must also try, again via history, to gain better access to each other. This is presumably difficult enough in western and central Europe, not to mention the Balkans and the countries of the former Soviet Union.

I also think that in the future historiography must in some way turn its attention more seriously to the histories of the Arab and Indian, Chinese, Japanese-and perhaps also the Korean- worlds as well as those of different parts of Africa. It may be no more than a minor blemish that a discipline that calls itself "History" ordinarily only deals with the development of Europe and North America and that the rest of the world appears only in so far as it was somehow affected by Europe. True, we have a number of specialists to cover the histories of the Asian and African peoples, and in some countries, like France, for example, there are more of them, while their number in others, like Germany, is smaller. But even in Germany that figure is slowly increasing. Yet must historical research into classical Occidental antiquity not also take account African and Asian history? Can we afford a situation in which historians at best have a coincidental knowledge of those fields? Most importantly, is it still tolerable today that we see our

own history essentially from the inside and without fully realizing how strange it must appear to the members of other non-European societies? And without appreciating the full extent to which it is peculiar?

The peculiarities of societies (and in particular of certain epochs in the history of these societies) have increasingly become a topic of historiography. All inquiries into historical subjects, consciously or unconsciously, delineate these themes from others. All important historical analyses are marked by certain underlying assumptions about the spectrum of anthropological possibilities of which one happens to be realized in a particular case in point. This means that we must also include to a far larger extent those possibilities that we encounter in Asia and Africa.

How this might be achieved is a difficult question. Jacob Burckhardt has remarked:

In the sciences ... we can only claim to master one limited branch, i.e., as a specialist, and somehow this is what one *should* be. However, if we do not want to lose the capacity to possess a general overview, we should also be dilettantes with respect to as many other fields as possible, at least on our own account in order to increase our knowledge and to enrich ourselves in our perspectives; otherwise we remain, with regard to everything that lies beyond our specialism, an *ignoramus* and possible even a very uncouth fellow.

At any rate, it is not sufficient that many historians know a lot about limited aspects of history; all historians should be knowledgeable about more than their specialized fields, or to be more precise: they should know something about divergent histories, including those outside their specialisms and more particularly about histories outside their own culture.

Next to ever more far-reaching specialization and, indeed, in opposition to it we should create and reinforce a trend toward "Generalization." It may sound sacrilegious, but the question must be allowed as to whether it is really appropriate that we historians usually devote ourselves to such an extent to specialized and even ever more specialized research. Much of this is no doubt very important and fruitful; the last decades have shown, not least in France, what significant new insights can be gained even in our age; no one would wish to miss these insights; there is no indica-

tion that this kind of work is going to disappear, and specialization clearly will have to remain.

However, next to it there is room for a more generalizing approach, for example à la Max Weber; it makes sense and may even be necessary, even if it may impose, in a few cases, certain restrictions on more specialized activities.

Thus there is the question as to whether the histories of Africa and Asia should be given more space and above all a place of their own in the school curricula so that they are no longer merely seen as a function in the context of European history. Would it not be possible to have a requirement for students of history to enroll at least in one more detailed course introducing them to the histories of Africa and Asia? Should we not try to integrate historians of other civilizations more into the general teaching and research of history, for instance, through seminars with a comparative angle that deal with individual problems of politics, economics, religion, mentality and so on within divergent societies and epochs? On the one hand, this would open up many fresh perspectives for all parts of historiography; on the other, it would promote historical "expertise," i.e., an understanding of different shapes that political organizations, parties, labor relations or dependencies and even gender relations may assume in different societies. We encounter but few of these formations in our own work and are therefore easily inclined to see them as absolute. What this really means is that we do not know enough about them; that we must learn more about them.

There is no question that reforms of this kind would not only benefit historical scholarship, even down to the detail, but would also be important both for our treatment of foreign nations and for an understanding of what is happening among us Europeans today. There is no need to elaborate on this.

An expansion of historical study that is gained in this way would require manifold contacts and cooperations with other disciplines, e.g. political science, economics, law, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies. Nevertheless, a clear demarcation line would remain between them and historiography. The historian would continue to do what he is ideally most capable of, i.e., through the study of sources, through analysis, but also in the

way he provides syntheses for different epochs, synchronically as well as diachronically. It will also remain indispensable that each historian has his own special fields, has gained his qualifications in them and is at home in them—if only in order to test in his own field all those questions that emerge from the discussions in different sub-disciplines and from those with other subjects; enabling him to make his contribution to the general discourse in an “expert” manner.

As a rule, what the other disciplines need from historiography can, as a rule, not be drawn from older, long published textbooks (although this happens quite frequently and with questionable results); rather it must time and again be created anew and on the basis of questions that are currently being posed. Often this may also then lead to the discovery of fresh sources. This generally results in gains for those who ask these questions as well as those (the historians in this case) who answer them, making modifications in the process—for all disciplines and perhaps even beyond.

## **Modes of Transmission to the General Public**

Finally, there is the third aspect—the face presented the outside world, the desire to inform wider circles about history, and non-historians in particular. Much is usually happening in this field, in essays and monographs or in grand surveys of entire epochs or histories.

A few matters deserve mention in this context. To begin with, there is the problem of consciously trying to put across an idea of the different parts of human existence that are being covered. We live fairly abstract lives today; compared to earlier generations our experiences are much less direct. Often we are also isolated. The prosperity that we have been able to enjoy during the period of our history that is just behind us has also caused us not to miss such experiences too much. Developments that have moved the history of mankind for thousands of years and that remained on the agenda outside the western and northern half of the globe, were deemed by us to be hardly conceivable anymore.

Karl Kraus remarked as early as 1914 that the unimaginable was occurring all the time; and that it would not happen if it were

imaginable. Hannah Arendt wrote in 1960 that Eichmann was incapable of *imagining* what he had *done* (“Eichmann habe sich nicht *vorstellen* können, was er *anstellte*”). Historical writing is well-suited to redressing our lack of imagination. At the same time there is the question of how far this capacity can reach, if the present provides but few bridges. Still, the attempt must in my view be made.

It also seems to me that the responsibility of the historian requires deeper reflection on what is required with respect to historical synthesis. The old problem of partiality presents itself in a new guise—and not just regarding the historian’s relationship with individual leaders, nations, religions, with those “upstairs” and those “downstairs,” with bourgeoisie and proletariat, for example. We can also take sides between men and women, perhaps even without realizing it, and between the majority and various minorities. Earlier on there was merely the danger that one sided with the winners or the losers; the question now is as to whether we have adequately taken into account the soldiers next to their commander or the victims next to the survivors. Whereas the glories and achievements of an epoch once attracted a lot of attention, we now ask at the same time whether sufficient thought has been given to the costs, the use of resources; and this use does not merely concern the air we breathe, the climate, trees, flora and fauna; it also involves the entire and complex field of what, in short, might be called mentality.

However, as we know today, it may also be a consequence of certain perhaps even unconscious decisions that the historian has made, if he highlights or de-emphasizes the role of personalities, or events, or structures and more or less autonomous processes. In this respect, too, there arises a need to reflect and to take stock; for it is not important what kind of picture is being transmitted of human potentialities and limitations.

The task is, especially in writings on the more recent past, to consider divergent possibilities of identification that demand their place in historical analysis. To refer to just the most extreme example: the history of the extermination of the European Jews must deal not only with the actual perpetrators and victims, but also with other participants of various kinds with varying degrees of

involvement. We must deal with the victims as well as the survivors; with those who complied and those who resisted. History must try to describe from a distant as well as a close-up perspective-and there are also parts about which it must remain silent.

The gist of my deliberations might be summarized as follows: historians, like everyone else, clearly have in their own way a responsibility toward their own age and its future. They should be conscious of this. They should mutually promote and reinforce this responsibility. The responsibility can pertain only to the performance of their scholarship, thereby reinforcing not only its significance, but also its fruitfulness. Above all, it is urgent that this responsibility be assumed for it is no longer possible to go on as before.