

ROUNDTABLE

# The Political Role of the Historian

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Debates about history have never been strictly confined to the world of scholarship. They have also been at the centre of political controversies in society. ‘The problem for professional historians’, Eric Hobsbawm once observed, ‘is that their subject has important social and political functions’.<sup>1</sup> ‘This duality’, he noted, ‘is the core of our subject’. This essay offers some reflections on the political role of historians, exploring the relationship between their scholarly work and their involvement in political debates. A closer look at the issue shows that it is not so much a problem as an opportunity for historians to engage with their subject on various levels, from the realm of scholarship to the realm of contemporary politics, which makes their position in society both more complex and more critical.

## The Realm of Scholarship

Historians have long debated the question of whether historical scholarship should address contemporary political concerns. However, as we shall see, it is possible to reconcile, to some extent, the conflicting positions in this controversy.

Historians are, of course, under no obligation to address questions of contemporary relevance in their research. Many of them agree that history has an intrinsic value irrespective of any implications for the present. The work of the historian is to seek historical knowledge for its own sake, out of pure intellectual curiosity, *or* for cultural enjoyment and entertainment, *or* to better understand the human condition of the past. No further justification is necessary. ‘We want experience to teach us not so much to be clever (for the next occasion!) as to be wise (forever!)’, Jakob Burckhardt famously declared.<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, Geoffrey Elton cautioned that ‘teachers of history must set their faces against the necessarily ignorant demands of “society” . . . for immediate applicability’ and ‘need to recall that the “usefulness” of historical studies lies hardly at all in the knowledge they purvey and in the understanding of specific present problems from their prehistory’.<sup>3</sup> There is no imperative that historical research should engage with questions that are of relevance to current affairs or to produce knowledge that is applicable in contemporary society. Of course, historical scholarship, even if it does not explicitly address contemporary concerns, can have an unintended impact on current political debates.

There are, however, historians who have maintained that their scholarship should be of current relevance. In fact, some would argue that history derives its very legitimacy as a discipline from offering explanations (and even guidance) on matters of contemporary concern. ‘Scientists, social scientists and historians’, E. H. Carr declared in *What is History?*, have ‘to increase man’s understanding of, and

<sup>1</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, ‘The Historian Between the Quest for the Universal and the Quest for Identity’, *Diogenes*, 42, 168 (1994), 51–63, 54–5. The other articles in this special issue of *Diogenes*, on ‘The Social Responsibility of the Historian’, are also important for our question.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1929), 7, which was first published in 1905; the translation is from Karl-Georg Faber, ‘The Use of History in Political Debate’, *History and Theory*, 17, 4 (1978), 36–67, 36.

<sup>3</sup> G. R. Elton, ‘Second Thoughts on History at the Universities’, *History*, 54, 180 (1969), 60–7, 66.

mastery over, his environment'.<sup>4</sup> Historians have pointed to various ways in which their scholarship can be useful for our society.<sup>5</sup> The most notable is, perhaps, the quest to learn from the study of the past in order to master the challenges of the present. 'History', J. R. Seeley famously proclaimed, was 'the school of statesmanship'.<sup>6</sup> This view is based on the old topos of history as the teacher for life, which, as Reinhard Koselleck demonstrated so powerfully in his 1979 essay 'Historia Magistra Vitae', has fluctuated in popularity among historians over the centuries.<sup>7</sup> It builds on the assumption of an uninterrupted temporal continuum of human life – a universality that leaves little room for contingency – which allows us to connect past, present, and future. Overall, this position represents our present *Zeitgeist*. Today, as our universities are turned into companies, in the commercialised world of the modern academy, with its fetishisation of 'impact', there are constant pressures to make historical scholarship relevant for society. At the same time, historians themselves, on their own impetus, increasingly show a desire to explicitly address in their works current concerns.

The question about the contemporary political relevance of historical work is related to (though not identical with) the question of political partisanship. Here, critics would point out that every historical work to some extent reflects the political views of its author. As Max Frisch once put it: 'A person who does not concern himself with politics has already made the political choice he was so anxious to avoid: he is serving the ruling party'.<sup>8</sup> The idea of depoliticised history, they argue, is an illusion. Some, like Hobsbawm, have even made the point that explicitly partisan scholarship can offer important interventions by looking at subjects that the historical establishment ignored, as witnessed in the fields of social and labour history, gender history, and post-colonial history.<sup>9</sup> Others, going even further, have suggested that it is the historian's obligation to make political judgements about the past. In the words of François René de Chateaubriand: 'When in the silence of abjection, only the chains of the slave and the voice of the informer are heard; when everyone trembles before the tyrant and it is as dangerous to court his favour as to merit his anger, the historian appears charged with exacting the vengeance of humanity'.<sup>10</sup>

Unsurprisingly, such views have often been sharply criticised. 'Politics has no place in the lecture hall', stated Max Weber, the great proponent of the political impartiality of the scholar, in his 1917 lecture 'Science as a Vocation'.<sup>11</sup> 'I could prove from the writings of our historians', he added, 'that wherever the academic introduces his own value judgement, there complete understanding of the

<sup>4</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, 2001), 80, which was first published in 1961. Richard J. Evans, in his introduction to the 2001 (40th anniversary) edition, argued that Carr indeed subordinated history entirely to the interests of the present, resulting in significant distortion.

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Kocka, 'Geschichte – wozu?', in Wolfgang Hardtwig, ed., *Über das Studium der Geschichte* (Munich: DTV, 1990), 427–43, discusses seven functions of historical research that make it useful for contemporary society, although some of them concern not history as a discipline in general but particular forms of historical research.

<sup>6</sup> J. R. Seeley, 'The Teaching of Politics: An Inaugural Lecture delivered at Cambridge', in J. R. Seeley, *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1870), 290–317, 299 and 317.

<sup>7</sup> Reinhard Koselleck, 'Historia Magistra Vitae: Über die Auflösung des Topos im Horizont neuzeitlich bewegter Geschichte', in Reinhard Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 38–66 and, more generally, Reinhard Koselleck, "'Erfahrungsraum" und "Erwartungshorizont" – zwei historische Kategorien', in Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 349–75. Jakob Tanner, 'Lehren der Geschichte – Lernen aus der Vergangenheit?', in Hans-Ulrich Grunder, Katja Kansteiner-Schänzlin and Heinz Moser, eds., *Aus der Geschichte lernen*, vol. 9 (Baltmannsweiler: Schneider, 2011), 271–7, looks at the twentieth-century revival of the debate.

<sup>8</sup> Max Frisch, *Tagebuch 1946–1949* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), 329, which was first published in 1950. John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: Macmillan, 1936), 383, made a similar point in the case of economics.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York: New Press, 1997), 124–40 ('Partisanship'), first published in *Culture, science et développement: Mélanges en l'honneur des Charles Morazé* (Toulouse: Privat, 1979), 267–79.

<sup>10</sup> François René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*, 2 vols. (Paris: Eugène et Victor Pénard, 1849–50), vol. 2, 460. Donald Bloxham, *History and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), is a more recent defence of value judgement about the past.

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (Geistige Arbeit als Beruf: Vorträge vor dem Freistudentischen Bund, Erster Vortrag) (Munich: Duncker und Humblot, 1919), 23–30; the quotes are on pages 23 and 25 respectively.

facts ceases'. This view is anything but outdated. 'Interpreting the past in terms of present concerns usually leads us to find ourselves morally superior', Lynn Hunt cautioned in 2002; 'the Greeks had slavery, even David Hume was a racist, and European women endorsed imperial ventures'.<sup>12</sup> Pointing out that 'our forbears constantly fail to measure up to our present-day standards', she warned historians about 'moral complacency and self-congratulation'. 'The discipline did not heed Hunt's warning', James Sweet recently lamented.<sup>13</sup> If we 'read the past through the prism of contemporary social justice issues', he declared, we risk producing history that 'ignores the values and mores of people in their own times, as well as change over time, neutralizing the expertise that separates historians from those in other disciplines'.

This conflict is closely related to the more general question of subjectivity in historical writing. Most would agree that the work of historians – including their choice of topic, their epistemic categories, the selection and order of information, the language used in their analysis, and so on – is, consciously or unconsciously, shaped by their own time and clime. Yet it is possible, without being naïvely positivist, to aspire to neutrality as a scholarly ideal – which may include reflecting critically on our own subjectivity – even if this goal is not fully attainable, and not to embrace subjectivity, and hence relativism, from the outset.<sup>14</sup> In the end, present-day historical research – the production of knowledge about the past based on the collection, examination, and interpretation of empirical evidence – is governed by a set of controllable rules.<sup>15</sup>

In any case, it is important to distinguish the three questions here (often lumped together in debates on 'presentism'): the inevitable subjectivity of us historians who, as children of our time, view the past from the perspective of the present (uncontroversial); explicit relevance of historical work for contemporary concerns (controversial, and our subject here); and active political partisanship and engaged history (very controversial).<sup>16</sup>

The debate on the question of the contemporary political relevance of historical scholarship (and partisanship) only emerged in nineteenth-century Europe – with the professionalisation of historical studies, which allowed historians to confine their work to the academic sphere, and a shift in the notion of the past as unique – and became more heated in the twentieth-century world.<sup>17</sup> In earlier centuries, writing history and engaging with contemporary political questions were usually inseparable. Historians celebrated their state's past glories, offered guidance to their princes, and so on. 'Whosoever wishes to foretell the future must consider the past', Machiavelli noted, 'for human events resemble those of preceding times'.<sup>18</sup>

It was the emergence of historical studies as an academic discipline in the nineteenth-century university that created a new type of historian, independent from political patronage, who could withdraw to the ivory tower. The idea that the historian could keep a distance from contemporary affairs was a result of this moment of professionalisation in which history was increasingly considered a positivist science. At the same time, and perhaps even more importantly, the *Sattelzeit* era, spanning from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century – as the unprecedented experiences of rapid change showed that the present could not easily be understood through patterns of the past – led to

<sup>12</sup> Lynn Hunt, 'Against Presentism', *Perspectives on History*, 40, 5 (1 May 2002), 7.

<sup>13</sup> James H. Sweet, 'Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present', *Perspectives on History*, 60, 6 (2022).

<sup>14</sup> Hobsbawm, *On History*, 124–5 and 127; Hobsbawm, 'The Historian Between the Quest for the Universal and the Quest for Identity', 56–7; and François Bédarida, 'Historical Practice and Responsibility', in *Diogenes*, 42, 168 (1994), 1–6, 5, summarise the critique against post-modern assault on the ideal of objectivity.

<sup>15</sup> Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that in the Anglophone debate, 'presentism', often not clearly defined, can have various meanings. This lack of conceptual clarity is apparent, for example, in most of the contributions to the recent *Past and Present* forum on 'presentism', and particularly in its introduction: Alexandra Walsham, 'Introduction: Past and ... Presentism', *Past and Present*, 234, 1 (2017), 213–17. David Armitage, 'In Defense of Presentism', in Darrin M. McMahon, ed., *History and Human Flourishing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 59–84, offers an excellent taxonomy of presentisms.

<sup>17</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (London: Pearson, 1984), 36–41 and Nicola Gallerano, 'History and the Public Use of History', *Diogenes*, 42, 168 (1994), 85–102, 90–4, offer overviews of this history.

<sup>18</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 3, 43, which was first published in Italian in 1531.

the emergence of the notion of history as always singular, new, and unique, which made it more difficult to make temporal connections between past, present, and future.<sup>19</sup> The experiences of the past (*Erfahrung*) and the expectations for the future (*Erwartung*), as Koselleck observed, became increasingly disentangled.

Historicism, so influential at that time, advocated the study of history as an end in itself. Its proponents warned readers that history cannot explain (let alone provide anything of practical use to) the present (or future); to put it in the words of Leopold von Ranke: ‘every epoch is immediate to god’.<sup>20</sup> Engagement with contemporary political questions in academic historical writing, in consequence, was increasingly considered unscholarly. This did not mean that historians did not get involved in contemporary debates outside academia, as politicians, publicists, and advisors. Historians like the German historicist triad Heinrich von Treitschke, Johann Gustav Droysen, and Heinrich von Sybel, for example, were all involved in political controversies of their time (and they often employed their historical knowledge in these debates). Yet, they believed in a separation of both spheres. The political interest in contemporary affairs should not influence a historian’s scholarship. ‘We can’, Ranke noted, ‘have a true impact on the present only if we disregard the latter for the moment and elevate ourselves to free, objective science’.<sup>21</sup>

This idea of history remained especially popular among conservative historians of the twentieth century. Elton was one of its the most famous proponents. Vivian Hunter Galbraith, Regius Professor at Oxford, pronounced that ‘the study of history is a personal matter, in which the activity is generally more valuable than the result’.<sup>22</sup> LSE philosopher Michael Oakshott, influential among so many conservative thinkers of his time, condemned the ‘practical attitude to the past’ as ‘the chief undefeated enemy of “history”’.<sup>23</sup> The suspicion these twentieth-century thinkers had of historical scholarship that sought contemporary political relevance was also the result of witnessing the excesses of historians who put their work in the service of an ideological cause under Nazi, fascist, and communist regimes. Many historians continue to be suspicious of historical works that show signs of topicality. Hunt’s plea ‘against presentism’ (and against political partisanship, as discussed above) in the profession is among the more influential recent interventions.<sup>24</sup> Today’s scepticism of presentism is also a reflection of our own societies’ relationship to time. In our contemporary world, as faith in ‘progress’ diminishes and ‘grand narratives’ are questioned, many of us find it ever more difficult to connect past, present, and future.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other historians strongly advocated historical scholarship that is relevant to present concerns. This group ranged from left-wing historians – who believed that the aim of the scholar was, to paraphrase Marx, to change the world and not merely to interpret it – to liberal historians who believed in the utilitarian primacy of any scholarly pursuit. ‘Man is an historical animal with a deep sense of his own past; and if he cannot integrate the past by a history explicit and true, he will integrate it by a history implicit and false’, Geoffrey Barraclough argued in the 1950s, adding: ‘The challenge is one which no historian with any conviction of the value of his work can ignore; and the way to meet it is not to evade the issue of “relevance”, but to accept the fact and work out its implications’.<sup>26</sup> In a different vein, Michel Foucault’s ‘History of the Present’ unequivocally advocated the critical historicisation of contemporary

<sup>19</sup> Koselleck, ‘Historia Magistra Vitae’, and Koselleck, “‘Erfahrungsraum’ und “‘Erwartungshorizont’”.

<sup>20</sup> Leopold von Ranke, *Über die Epoche der neueren Geschichte: Vorträge dem Könige Maximilian II. von Bayern gehalten* (Darmstadt: WBG, 1982), 7, which was first published in 1854.

<sup>21</sup> Leopold von Ranke, *Sämtliche Werke*, 54 vols. (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1867–90), vol. 51/52 (‘Abhandlungen und Versuche’), 575.

<sup>22</sup> V. H. Galbraith, in R. C. K. Ensor et al, *Why We Study History* (London: King and Staples, 1944), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Oakshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Basic, 1962), 165 and 154.

<sup>24</sup> Hunt, ‘Against Presentism’.

<sup>25</sup> François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003). The meaning of ‘presentism’ in Hartog’s work is different to that commonly used in English, by Hunt and others; see also footnote 15.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Barraclough, *History in a Changing World* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 25.

phenomena.<sup>27</sup> The greatest twentieth-century schools of history – among them the *Annales*, *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, and Social History – all advocated historical writing that enhances our understanding (and the betterment) of the contemporary world; ‘the interest of the past is that it illuminates the present’, as Jacques Le Goff put it.<sup>28</sup> The idea remains influential. ‘Whatever respect we owe the dead, history is still written by – and meaningful to – the living’, Samuel Moyn recently noted, arguing that ‘abuses of the past call for uses in the name of a better future’.<sup>29</sup>

Is it time to move beyond the tired dichotomy between historicism and presentism? The views of both schools are not necessarily always mutually exclusive. We can distinguish between the scholarly value of a historical work, which can be innovative in itself, and its relevance for current concerns. A historian can study the past in its own right, without explicitly addressing questions of contemporary concern, and simultaneously, as a welcome by-product, produce work that is relevant for contemporary society. In fact, any historical work will help us understand, to some extent, the human condition in general, notwithstanding the radical differences of the human cosmos over the centuries. Thus, historical inquiry can help us to make observations about past worlds on their own terms *and*, on a more abstract level, the past, present, and future worlds in general terms. Or, to offer another example, a historian can study a topic that is of contemporary relevance, yet the historical work itself can show, in a counter-intuitive way, that the past was distinctive, unique, and incomparable with the present.

### The Realm of Politics

Historical narratives are important in virtually every society of the world.<sup>30</sup> They shape the self-image of countries and the image of other countries. They influence our perception of the legitimacy of political, economic, and social conditions. Political discourses, as a result, frequently draw on history. The past gets politicised. The politics of history shapes peoples’ lives. Of course, as Friedrich Nietzsche wisely warned in his 1874 *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, history, or memory, can be as harmful as it can be useful in human society.<sup>31</sup> Yet, regardless of its use, history is at the forefront of political life. (To understand the importance of history in politics we only need to look to dictatorial states which relentlessly persecute intellectuals who write histories they perceive as dangerous; in fact, it is the humanities, not the sciences, that authoritarians see as their most potent threat.)

Historians, with their scholarly authority, may be considered the ideal contributors to public political debates about the past.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, still today, they often benefit from the status of history as

<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), is the most important example. Michael S. Roth, ‘Foucault’s “History of the Present”’, *History and Theory* 20, 1 (1981), 32–46 and David Garland, ‘What is a “History of the Present”? On Foucault’s Genealogies and their Critical Preconditions’, *Punishment and Society* 16, 4 (2014), 365–384 offer analyses of this approach. Indeed, Historical Sociology more generally, reflected in the works of Norbert Elias, Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly, and many others, rests on the historicisation of contemporary phenomena.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), xx; the original Italian and French editions do not include this statement.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Moyn, *Human Rights and the Uses of History* (London: Verso, 2014), xiii. The forum ‘History and the Present’ in *Modern Intellectual History* (2022), particularly Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins’ introduction, offers a reflection on the recent revival of the ‘turn to the present’.

<sup>30</sup> Nicola Gallerano, ‘History and the Public Use of History’, 85–9, for example, offers an overview of the ‘public use’ of history. The importance of history in political debate and policy-making is discussed, for instance, by Ernest May, *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), in the American case, and Faber, ‘The Use of History in Political Debate’, in the German case.

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, 4 parts (Leipzig: E.W. Fritsch, 1873–6), Part 2 (‘Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben’).

<sup>32</sup> Jakob Tanner, ‘Geschichtswissenschaft, politisches Engagement und Öffentlichkeit’, in Paul Nolte, Manfred Hettling, Frank-Michael Kuhlemann, et al., eds., *Perspektiven der Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000), 150–8 discusses whether historians should engage in public political debate, pointing out the advantages and disadvantages for historians to do so. Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) is a more recent call for more involvement of historians in contemporary debate.

a 'neutral' academic discipline, as it emerged at the height of historicism, which allows them to present themselves as impartial in public debates. While some have strictly rejected any involvement in debates outside of academia as unscholarly, others have argued that it is their social responsibility. Although historians are not under any obligation to engage in political debate, it seems, in my view, important that they do so, as citizens. After all, given the importance of history in political discourse (and its frequent misuse in that sphere), professional historians cannot simply stand by silently. It is worth noting that this has nothing to do with the matters discussed in the first part of this essay, as even historians who prefer conducting historical research without explicitly addressing in it issues of contemporary concern, can, of course, on the side, get involved in public political debate.

Some of the greatest historians of their generation have engaged in discussions on current affairs outside academia. Among them are Alexis de Tocqueville and Leopold von Ranke, Jean Jaurès and Marc Bloch, Eric Williams and Walter Rodney, Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson, Ernest May and Margaret McMillan. Often, though not always, their interventions are related to their scholarly work.

The form of historians' involvement in contemporary political debates, moreover, varies widely, from offering a mere historical contextualisation of current concerns to providing practical guidance and political advocacy. Some, in the tradition of Cicero's *historia magistra vitae*, have argued that historians, drawing on centuries of human experience, are the ideal advisors on questions of government policy. There have even been attempts, such as the 'History and Policy Group' in Britain, to institutionalise the political role of historians in government. The motives of historians who have become involved in debates about contemporary politics also vary: ideological investment in a political cause; material interest, for example in the form of monetary compensation; an appetite for power and political influence; a narcissistic desire for prestige and publicity; a simple sense of duty as a citizen; or, not uncommonly, a combination of these incentives.

The political engagement of historians is neither good nor bad per se. Often, historians have engaged in historical scholarship to the highest standard while they have at the same time, on the side, made important contributions to public debate. Their interventions have helped to confront the political misuses of history – challenging popular myths about the past and setting the historical record straight – and highlight the historical contexts of contemporary concerns. Their involvement has shown that there is nothing vulgar about historians engaging in public debate. It has demonstrated that their profession – with its techniques of rigorous scrutiny of evidence, critical cautiousness over sweeping claims, and factual knowledge of the past – has much to offer.<sup>33</sup> In fact, given their skills and sensitivities, historians have often proven to be invaluable in political debates more generally.

Still, it is worth noting that their interventions have also often failed to convince those who misuse history for their politics and that the recommendations they make to the political elites have often been ignored when they clash with the priorities of the powerful.<sup>34</sup> Hegel once famously noted that 'what experience and history teach is this – that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it', and he may not have been completely wrong.<sup>35</sup>

At other times, however, the political involvement of historians has had disastrous, even murderous, consequences. They have, using historical arguments, justified territorial revisionism, leading to invasions, expulsions, and genocides; invented national (or other) communities, leading to the exclusion, discrimination, and at times persecution of minorities; and stigmatised and demonised entire peoples. In the most extreme cases, historians, unable to draw a clear line between their academic and their political writing, have given up (or bent) all academic standards in their own scholarly work to become fully engaged in political discourse.

<sup>33</sup> Enrique Florescano, 'The Social Function of History', *Diogenes*, 42, 168 (1994), 41–9, offers an overview of what the historian has to offer to the debate.

<sup>34</sup> Hobsbawm, 'The Historian Between the Quest for the Universal and the Quest for Identity', 61, on the limits of impact.

<sup>35</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. by D. Eduard Gans (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1837), 9; for the English translation, Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), 6.

The historian's involvement in political debate may be divided into three broad categories. First, there have been interventions in the political construction of identity cultures. Historians have been central in the invention of national identities – often defined through shared history, language, folklore, and so on – across the globe. One of the most unsettling cases is that of *Volksgeschichte* in Nazi Germany, examined so well in the work of Willi Oberkrome, which sought to construct a historically grown national-racial community of Germans.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, historians have been vital in undermining historical constructions of the nation (and of nationalist myths). Similarly, while some historians have constructed imperial identities – and more recently neo-imperial nostalgia, as seen with neo-Ottomanism in Turkey, neo-Prussianism in Germany, and neo-Victorianism in Britain – others have questioned it.<sup>37</sup> And whereas some have contributed to the construction of regional identities – including scholars who have created a distinct European history – others – including the nationalist 'Historians for Britain' – have challenged those identities. Historians, more recently, have also worked hard to construct identities of a cosmopolitan society by highlighting the long history of the presence of diverse minority groups. In all cases history is used to legitimise the boundaries of socio-political communities, defining the terms of inclusion and exclusion of human beings. The late Hans-Ulrich Wehler, doyen of the Bielefeld School, argued that Turkey should not be part of the European Union based on the continent's 'historical boundaries', a category he did not define, as I pointed out in one of my first public interventions in *Die Zeit*, as an undergraduate student, in 2005.<sup>38</sup> I have, since then, contributed to various similar public debates – among them, most recently, the controversies about the global nationalist resurgence – which have demonstrated to me the importance of the historian's voice in conversations about current affairs.<sup>39</sup>

Second, there are disputes about the memory of past injustices which shape the historical conscience of a society. Examples are the debates about fascism in Italy during the transition to the Second Republic; the Fischer Controversy in the 1960s about Germany's responsibility for the First World War, questioning the notion of a 'good' Germany that was only destroyed in 1933 by National Socialism; the German Historikerstreit in the late 1980s about the uniqueness of the Holocaust; French debates over Vichy; Turkish debates about the Armenian genocide; and American debates about slavery, such as the recent controversy over the '1619 Project'. These wars over memory have been fought over writings, monuments, and movies. They often centre on the question of guilt. One of the most extreme variants here is the simple refusal to acknowledge the existence of past crimes, such as Holocaust denial. The work of historians has been invaluable here, as shown most dramatically during the David Irving trial in 2000, at which historians around Richard J. Evans were instrumental in dismantling the manipulation of historical evidence.<sup>40</sup>

The third common arena in which historians are frequently mobilised outside the realm of scholarship is in legal disputes. These can concern repatriations, such as stolen antiques from the former colonial world or Jewish property expropriated by the Nazis; reparations and compensations, such as Greek claims for German payments for the destruction the country suffered during the Second World War; and territorial disputes, such as the controversies over the status of the Senkaku Islands, Crimea, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Among the earliest, most spectacular cases was the role of historians in

<sup>36</sup> Willi Oberkrome, *Volksgeschichte: Methodische Innovation und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1918–1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2003), xi–xxviii vs. Richard Drayton, 'Where Does the World Historian Write From? Objectivity, Moral Conscience and the Past and Present of Imperialism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46, 3 (2011), 671–85, offers an example. Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: How History Makes History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), provides a more general critical appraisal of the politics of British imperial history.

<sup>38</sup> Hans-Ulrich Wehler, 'Was bleibt von Schröder?', *Die Zeit*, 47 (2005); and, in response, David Motadel, 'Befremdliche Thesen', *Die Zeit*, 49 (2005).

<sup>39</sup> David Motadel, 'The Myth of Middle-Class Liberalism', *The New York Times* (25 Jan. 2020); David Motadel, 'The Surprising History of Nationalist Internationalism', *The New York Times* (4 July 2019); and David Motadel, 'Histories of Fascism in America', *The Guardian* (19 Aug. 2017), are examples.

<sup>40</sup> Richard J. Evans, *Telling Lies about Hitler: The Holocaust, History and the David Irving Trial* (London: Verso, 2002).

proving the falsification of documents during the legal battles of the Dreyfus Affair.<sup>41</sup> I myself have been involved in the controversy over Hohenzollern claims to some of their former property.<sup>42</sup> I found myself confronted by historians who were hired by the former royal family to produce reports that supported their case. There are few better examples of the significance – positive and negative – of the historian's intervention beyond the world of academia.

Overall, our involvement in past political controversies has shown that it is important for us as historians to be aware of the different inner logics of scholarly pursuit, with its ideal of neutrality, and political debate, with its pressures of partisanship.<sup>43</sup> Historians have frequently adopted the logic of political discourse over that of scholarly inquiry. But, if they give up on their principles of critically engaging with historical evidence, even if only when participating in political debate, they jeopardise their integrity as scholars. Historians should accept the primacy of scholarly standards, letting historical interventions influence the political debate, and not vice versa, even if their political engagement is completely separate from their academic work. There is much room for a scholar to engage in political issues without abandoning scholarly standards. Moreover, there are also practical pitfalls. Political debate involves different media – not the academic article or monograph, which the historian is used to, but mass media – and historians who intervene in politics are exposed to unique pressures (even intimidation) from the powerful, which may be unfamiliar to them in the academic world.

There will always be scholars who prefer to confine themselves to the world of scholarship and there will always be historians who engage in politics outside the ivory tower. In the current moment, however, historians seem once again more willing to intervene in the public political sphere. Hobsbawm several decades ago lamented that the increasing specialisation of historians made it more and more difficult for them to engage confidently in wider political debates outside academia.<sup>44</sup> Yet, while his observation about academic specialism remains true, it seems to me that, perhaps paradoxically, more and more historians are engaging self-confidently in political debate outside (and sometimes far outside) the confines of their specialist field.

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<sup>41</sup> Vincent Duclert, 'De l'engagement des savants à l'intellectuel critique: Une histoire intellectuelle de l'affaire Dreyfus', *Réflexions Historiques*, 24, 1 (1998), 25–62 and Thomas Ribémont, 'Les historiens chartistes au cœur de l'affaire Dreyfus', *Raisons Politiques*, 18 (2005), 97–116.

<sup>42</sup> David Motadel, 'What Do the Hohenzollerns Deserve?', *The New York Review of Books* (26 Mar. 2020), 25–7.

<sup>43</sup> Hobsbawm, *On History*, 124–40, offers reflections on this tension. Hobsbawm, 'The Historian Between the Quest for the Universal and the Quest for Identity'; Bédarida, 'Historical Practice and Responsibility'; and Meier, 'Scholarship and the Responsibility of the Historian', discuss some ideals the historian should follow if s/he engages in public political discourse.

<sup>44</sup> Hobsbawm, *On History*, 138.