



## Is there a Future to the study of the Past?

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**ABSTRACT:** Whereas historical scholarship is prospering and is constantly moving into new and uncharted territories, the *teaching of history* seems to be in a serious crisis in terms of student enrollment and its public prestige. This is true at least in some countries and is especially so with respect to the teaching of eras which precede the twentieth century. The present article seeks to explore some of the reasons for this crisis, and proposes a few arguments which can provide a *raison d'être* for the study of history at the beginning of the twenty-first century. While history is no longer regarded simply as *magistra vitae*, nor is it the foundation for competing ideologies as it used to be in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, there are very important cultural functions, beyond sheer intellectual curiosity, that the study of history fulfills, functions which can, and should, be emphasized also to the public at large. Chief among them is the need to come to terms with rapid *change* in society and human affairs, a need which is especially acute nowadays, and which only the discipline of history is equipped to deal with systematically.

**KEYWORDS:** crisis of historical teaching; purpose of historical teaching; historical change; historical time; historical relevance.

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**RESUMEN:** ¿Hay un futuro para el estudio del pasado?.- Mientras el estudio académico de la Historia prospera y avanza constantemente en nuevos e inexplorados territorios, la *enseñanza de la Historia* parece estar en severa crisis, en términos de captación de estudiantes y de prestigio público. Esto es cierto al menos en algunos países, y especialmente respecto a la enseñanza de las épocas que precedieron al siglo XX. En este artículo se pretende explorar algunos de los motivos de esta crisis, y proponer algunos argumentos que puedan proporcionar una *raison d'être* para el estudio de la Historia en los comienzos del siglo XXI. Aunque la Historia ya no se contemple simplemente como *magistra vitae*, ni como el fundamento de ideologías en competencia, como solía ocurrir en el siglo XIX y en la primera mitad del siglo XX, persisten importantes funciones culturales, más allá de la mera curiosidad intelectual, que el estudio de la Historia satisface y que pueden y deben enfatizarse ante la sociedad. La principal de ellas es la necesidad de asimilar el rápido *cambio* de la sociedad y de los asuntos humanos, necesidad especialmente aguda en nuestros días, y para cuyo abordaje sistemático únicamente está equipada la disciplina de la Historia.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** crisis de la enseñanza de la Historia; propósito de la enseñanza de la Historia; cambio histórico; tiempo histórico; importancia de la Historia.

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The teaching of history seems to be in a serious crisis. At least this is the impression of many practicing historians. Although statistical data point to a certain stability, even a modest rise in recent years in the absolute number of history students in some countries like the U.S and Great Britain, relatively to other disciplines like some of the Social Sciences (particularly Business Administration) and of course, computer studies - the status of history is clearly in decline.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the discipline of history is thriving in terms of the level, richness and fresh perspectives of its *research*, there are relatively less young students choosing to study history at the University level. And as we all know, academic budgets are constantly being cut, especially in the humanities, including history. The teaching of history in high schools is similarly in decline in terms of hours, content, and surely of prestige, once again, particularly in comparison with the teaching of the Sciences. The tendency to focus on limited issues, mainly pertaining to the recent (often – national) past, that of the twentieth century, also cripples a serious, long-term, understanding of history. This is clearly noticeable in my own country, Israel, and, I believe, in many other countries as well. In the long run, this situation threatens the state of the discipline as a whole, first of all, because fewer Ph.D. graduates in history are able to find jobs, and secondly, since these trends may ultimately lead to a sharp decrease in the number of young historians.

There are several reasons for this crisis, besides the overall crisis of higher education, especially in the humanities. They are quite well-known, but let me mention some principal ones. First of all, there is a long-term *epistemological* crisis. Our discipline as a scholarly discipline largely developed, as we all know, in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century under a rather clear and unitary paradigm. That paradigm assumed an objective historical reality (similar, though by no means identical to natural reality), independent of the historian-observer, requiring a rigorous critical method by which to reach that historical reality.<sup>2</sup> It also assumed the intentionality of the historical agents (mostly political leaders, generals and members of the elite), and a linear progress towards modernity. Within that paradigm, sometimes called the “Whig interpretation of history” - Western Civilization, secular, scientific, technological, industrial and democratic, was seen as an end-point towards which, whether directly or indirectly, all human societies were supposed to develop. (For a classical critique of this view see Butterfield, 1965). This “meta-narrative” has gradually given place in the twentieth century to a *socio-economic* view of history, whether of the Marxist type, or of the structuralist version of the *Annales* school (Iggers, 2005, Chapters 5–7). Both the political and the

socio-economic paradigms, however - the second even more than the first - shared a wish to be as “scientific” as possible, if not on the model of the Natural Sciences, at least on that of the Social Sciences. Since the 1950s, however, the first, political paradigm, started to decline, and in the 1970, the social-economic paradigm similarly came under increasing criticism. These changes were the combined result of a disenchantment with politics, a belated reaction, perhaps, to the Second World War and the Holocaust, the processes of decolonization, the revival of religious movements, and the growing skepticism towards modern scientific and industrial culture (Iggers, 2005, pp. 97–100). The *plurality* of narratives which have come in their stead, especially in the last generation, have given a real boost to the richness and variety of historical scholarship, but led on their part to growing skepticism and disenchantment among the public at large. (For a forceful critique of these skeptical implications, while still accepting, indeed – promoting, the centrality of narratives in historical discourse see Ginzburg, 1999). Why study history if it does not tell us a coherent story on the basis of which we can base our values, fortify our view of the world, and even make reasonable predictions with respect to the future? Furthermore, if historians themselves keep stressing the *tentative*, even *subjective* and *relative*, character of the picture they present to students, why bother studying such accounts? If indeed (following Hayden White and many others) the difference between history and literature, between allegedly “scholarly research” and creative fiction is narrowing down, if not completely obliterated, why subject oneself to the rigorous traditional techniques of the discipline, when one can enjoy just as well a good novel, movie or theatrical play?<sup>3</sup> Personally, I think that this skeptical critique has gone much too far and I am worried by the extent to which some practicing historians have accepted that radical critique. In between a naïve view of “objective”, “scientific” history, and a skeptical view which sees all historical narratives as just another type of fiction, I believe that there is a vast territory of critical discourse which can and should sustain responsible historical scholarship, but I shall return to this point below.

The epistemological crisis was linked with a more specific *political* one. Our academic profession developed in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth to a great extent under the auspices of the *nation-state*. In many respects, it was conceived as fortifying and enhancing the nation-state (hence its emphasis on the political dimension of history). For that reason, the historical profession also received the strong *support* of the State (Iggers, 2005, Chapters 1,2; Krieger, 1977). Historians (though by no means *all* of them) were at the

forefront of building-up national identities in the traditional states of Europe, and even more so, in the new nations *outside* of Europe. They did so by uncovering, and reconstructing the national past, and by conveying it, in teaching and in writing, to future generations, thus contributing to (or even establishing) a collective memory. As late as 1985, a prominent American historian like William McNeill tended to link historical knowledge with certain collective myths, calling them “Mythis-tory”, while expecting them to be critically constructed” (McNeill, 1986). That same decade of the 1980s saw, however, the growing interest (and, once again - the growing skepticism!) concerning the relationship between “history” and “memory”.<sup>4</sup> The so-called “New historians” have increasingly cast doubt on the conventional narratives, collective memories or “myths”, which have served as the basis for these national identities, calling them “imagined communities” based on “invented traditions”.<sup>5</sup> The jury is still out on the issue how “invented” national identities really are, but in the *public eyes*, the “myths breakers” are more visible (and vocal) than scholars who still accept the validity of concepts such as “ethnic identity” and “national traditions”. Indeed, historians are moving nowadays away, not only from *national* histories, but also from an exclusive focus on *Western* history. The growing interest in *universal* history, or *World* history, and the pursuit of the means and techniques by which to teach it to students, is surely one of the most promising ways to overcome the present crisis and make history teaching “relevant” once again.<sup>6</sup>

Going back to the *causes* of the crisis, historians have also increasingly focused their attention on the moral and political failures within their own national histories. This is particularly manifest not only in countries with a totalitarian background in the 20<sup>th</sup> century like Germany, Russia and Japan, but also in the new nation-states, and once again, my home-country, Israel, is a typical example. In the past twenty years, “new historians” in Israel have caused an on-going storm because of the doubts they have raised concerning traditional national narratives, and even more, because of their implicit or explicit moral critique concerning past deeds; whether actions committed in the course of the War of Independence, for example, or events connected with the origins of the refugee problem.<sup>7</sup> Under these circumstances, no wonder that public opinion, and even more so, politicians in decision-making posts, have adopted a growing mistrust towards academic historians, a mistrust which is quickly translated into budgetary cuts, and at times, into a more stringent supervision of history text-books for high-schools. Paradoxically, such mistrust led public authorities to lay *more* emphasis on national history in high-school curricula in

order to “immune” students from the “subversive” currents in the scholarly world. Having served for a few years as the chairman of the academic committee overseeing the history curriculum in high schools in Israel, I can testify to these tensions first-hand. At the same time, I should stress that history teachers in Israel, at high-schools, and clearly, in Academe, have quite a free hand to teach, as far as the historical *substance* is concerned, according to their professional convictions. The reservations on the part of political authorities are manifest on the one hand in changing emphases in the curriculum in favor of national history, and on the other, in diminishing resources (and in reducing the number of hours allotted to the teaching of history), rather than in outright censorship of any kind. Yet, if history teaching, especially, academic teaching, is no longer a safe bulwark of national identity, indeed, if it is often seen as *subversive* of cherished national beliefs, why continue promoting it?

There is, however, a deeper *cultural* cause for the crisis of history teaching, closely connected with the *epistemological* and *political* aspects that I have mentioned already. Our discipline has developed in the nineteenth century under the cultural, almost metaphysical premise according to which *history* was the ultimate judge in human and political affairs. Indeed, and here again I just repeat a truism, history has, since the French Revolution, replaced divine Providence, as the overarching principle by which human affairs were assessed. “History will judge”, “history tells us” are the type of phrases one still hears from time to time in the media and in public discussions. Professional historians, however, keep informing the public nowadays that history *cannot* judge, and surely, cannot tell us anything normative. We are no longer so sure that Jefferson was right in saying (in *Notes on Virginia*, 1784) that “History, by apprizing [us] of the past, will enable [us] to judge of the future”. But then, why study history in the first place? For what use? Under the exhilarating changes in society, technology (especially communications, high-tech and computers) and the dramatic transformation of sexual and social mores in recent years, what use is it to study past societies, past cultures, past events? Our children (and grandchildren), as well as most students, naturally look toward the *future*, rather than to the past. Why bother with the past when they feel that the future will be so *different* from the past, and when they are told that the past can no longer justify (as it used to do) any of their actions, or even serve as a foundation for their own *identity*?

So, is there a future to the study of the past? I believe there is, but it has to be founded on different grounds from the traditional ones. We, professional historians, have been so busy with pioneering new

horizons for the study of the past, in social history, gender history, *histoire de mentalités*, cultural history, etc. that we seem to have paid little attention to the *public* implications of these exciting new perspectives. True, these new horizons are extremely intriguing and in some cases, are able to have a broad public appeal (Natalie Davis' book *Le retour de Martin Guerre* and especially – the movie based on her meticulous research, is a famous case in point). The *connoisseurs* will continue to be attracted to these vistas, but we are at the risk of loosing the public *legitimacy* for our profession, and the central role it used to play in the academic and cultural sphere. We need to train our students, I believe, not only in the substance and methods of history, but also to clarify the aims, values and *uses* of our discipline.

Let me make a few proposals which I hope can be a basis for discussion: The first benefit which is usually ascribed to the study of history is that by learning the past, one better understands the present. This traditional response is clearly a good and important one, and up to a point, remains so today too. We are all convinced that no serious understanding of present-day political, international, scientific, social or cultural reality is possible without a firm knowledge of the processes which have brought that reality about. We should take into account, however, that the primacy of a “genealogical” understanding is not shared by *all* our academic colleagues, and is not easy to instill in the younger generation, surely not when it comes to periods far a way in time. Moreover, by relying on such an argument for the study of history, we concede too much to the opponent: namely, that *the present* ought to judge the “relevance” of past experiences. The present is clearly and rightly influential in forming the *perspective* from which we see the past, or in choosing the *problems* on which we focus, but even here we ought to be careful to avoid anachronism.

The study of history, therefore, cannot be defended, in my opinion, *solely* in terms of understanding the present. More generally, history has been traditionally promoted as a *humanistic* discipline. As historians, we surely all agree that there is no better avenue to study man and human culture than the study of history.<sup>8</sup> But can we compete nowadays with disciplines like Psychology, Anthropology, even Philosophy? We usually stress the individual and unique focus of historical studies in contradistinction with the Social Sciences, but even here we have a strong competition with Literature and the Visual Arts, especially with Television and the Movies. And since historians themselves have increasingly stressed, as I pointed above, the “non-scientific”, even “fictional” nature of their discipline, what is the actual advantage of the historical narrative over the literary one for understanding

the human condition? Finally, the present crisis of history is itself part and parcel of the overall crisis of the humanities, so that the “humanistic” answer does not necessarily carry much weight with either potential students, or the public authorities.

Without forsaking the above traditional arguments (including an epistemological defense of *some* “objective” value of the historical discipline!), I would therefore suggest emphasizing two *further* highly important educational functions history possesses, in my opinion, functions which can also appeal, perhaps, to the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. First, it teaches us to understand and appreciate societies, political systems, values and cultures *different* from our own. This function is also linked with the turn to *universal* history which I have mentioned above. But it is a role which history plays even when its focus is quite narrow geographically. Indeed, the profound changes that our discipline has undergone in the past fifty years or so, enhance such a role: The plurality of narratives; the lack of water-tight certainty; the legitimate (though carefully circumscribed) place of “impressions”; the giving-up of a “progressive”, linear view of history; the deep influence of anthropology – have all increasingly emphasized the nature of history as a type of *travel*: A travel into foreign and sometimes exotic societies. This last perspective, it seems to me, can be especially attractive to the young generation of students. The past is, after all, “a foreign country” as David Lowenthal has famously stated.<sup>9</sup> In Israeli society, for example, many students come to the University after a few months of a *grand tour* abroad (and this is *following* their army service, namely at the age of 21 or 22!), often a tour in Latin America, India, or the Far-East. Rather than stressing the similarities or the “relevance” of past societies, I suggest that we, as university teachers, should stress the *differences* between our society and the historical periods we teach.<sup>10</sup> This is even true with the recent past, since how misleading can it be to think that our forefathers thought and behaved exactly as we do, whether in Japan in the Meiji period, in Colonial India, in Soviet Russia, or even in the Weimar Republic, not to mention – the Jews under Nazi rule?!

In this respect, history is indeed, like anthropology, educating its students to encounter *alien* societies and cultures, to *understand* them, without necessarily *judging* them. One hardly needs to stress the importance of such training in this day and age. (I don't wish to get into the thorny question of the place of moral *judgments* in the teaching of history, but I believe that in the university context, it plays a relatively minor role). Toleration of the “other” is one of the most critical values modern societies need to develop, and history, I believe, may be the best discipline to do that. This is also a function

which we can point to in defending the importance of our discipline in public debates. Yet, in this respect, history may not be that different from some of the Social Sciences, particularly Anthropology.

The unique character of history, however, resides in dealing with differences in *time*, not just in space. Herein, I believe, resides the most important educational value of our discipline nowadays, though not always sufficiently emphasized.<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, the nature of time has been perhaps the most important philosophical and scientific issue in the last century or so, and I by no means pretend that I am able to tackle this complicated subject, let alone – add anything to its elucidation. More limited, but also quite controversial is the question of *historical time* (in contradistinction to Cosmic time, Metaphysical time, Ecological or seasonal time, Social or generational time, and Psychological or existential time), a question that has attracted quite a lot of attention in recent years.<sup>12</sup> *Historical Time* may not be homogeneous, as Jacques le Goff has shown us, and is surely not “linear” or progressive, but is nevertheless unidirectional, even if certain cultures and certain thinkers conceive it as cyclical. (Corfield, 2007, Ch. 1). As is well known, historians have divided historical time in the past half-century in various ways, distinguishing between the *longue durée*, *conjonctures* and *événements*, or between “deep continuities”, gradual-evolutionary change and “turbulences”, to bring just two examples of such classifications.<sup>13</sup>

*Change* remains, in any case, the central historical category. (The secondary role this dimension had in the so-called *Annales* school was, in my view, the main drawback of that “structuralist” approach). It is not by chance that the consciousness of historical time (and of the discipline of history in general) arose mainly after the French Revolution and in the course of the Industrial Revolution, when the differences between past and present became glaring, and consequently, also the expectations of a future which will be different from the present (Koselleck, 2004). Understanding change – whether political change, social dynamics or cultural and religious transformations – is the primary *cognitive* aim of the historian. Furthermore, in my view, it is also a mental and a *psychological* aim. History is the only discipline which familiarizes students with the dominance of change in human societies and teaches them to accept change and try and understand it.

Need I emphasize the importance of such training and education at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? We may no longer view history as the “ultimate judge” of values or political and social ideologies, as many thinkers (though by no means all!) viewed it in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Yet, needless to say, the pace of *change*,

which was among the reasons for the emergence of our discipline in the nineteenth century, as I have mentioned above, has only accelerated at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The last few years have provided us with several relevant and dramatic cases in point, beginning with September 11<sup>th</sup> and continuing with the recent economic crisis, not to mention the earlier collapse of the Soviet block and the Communist ideology, or the breathtaking revolution in communications and the digitalization of culture. Historians for the most part have failed to predict any of these dramatic changes. “Prediction” is definitely *not* one of the functions of the historians, and surely, contrary to what people sometimes expect, neither is it within their ability. Yet, while I don’t wish to claim that historians could have better foreseen the World Economic Crisis, for example, I would argue that they should not have been that surprised by it. Moreover, they could have taught their colleagues and students something about previous economic crises, particularly that of 1929. Whether similar to the present crisis or not, one thing history *can* teach us – that periods of growth and prosperity come to an end, often unexpectedly. The historian cannot be a prophet, but his role is to teach his society that *change* is constantly taking place and to prepare his students, cognitively as well as psychologically, that change is the main feature of life. In this respect, we historians are all students of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: One cannot step twice into the same river. (The radical and skeptic might say with Kratylos – not even once! But as stressed above, I think we have also to avoid overly skeptical views of our discipline).

So, this, I submit, could be our *Apologia pro disciplina nostra*. I believe that there *is* a future to the teaching of the past, even if its *raison d’être* would be somewhat different from traditional ones. Not as a universal judge of right and wrong (though as recent controversies concerning the Holocaust and its denial indicate that the search for *facts* do have a *moral* function!), nor as making one singular sense of the very confused story of humanity. Neither does history’s *raison d’être* reside in solely legitimizing national identities or political ideologies. Rather, it is a way of offering *one* account for understanding the present; a *privileged* avenue for the understanding of man and society in general, and what is perhaps more important – a *good* way of opening our eyes to different values and ways of life; and the *best* means of sensitizing us to the realities of change and providing us with the tools to *explain* it, deal with it, and accept it. This last function – directing the attention to the centrality of change in human life and trying to explain it – is an intellectual, psychological and normative function crucial in a

rapidly changing world, a function no other discipline can fulfill, a function which is at the very heart of our enterprise and which makes our discipline more than ever “relevant” to the public at large, “relevant” in the best sense of this word.

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## NOTES

1. This paragraph is based primarily on the situation in Israel, and on a  *cursory*  examination of statistical data from American and British Universities. See for example the articles by: Robert B. Townsend (2008a and 2008b) and Higher Education Statistics Authority (2008).
2. The founding father of this paradigm was the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), though he actually combined features laid earlier by Eighteenth century historians, and relied, of course, on the Classical model of Thucydides. See for a general up-to-date survey of the history of our discipline, Iggers (2005). On Ranke, see, *ibid.*, Chapter I. For a biography of Ranke which stresses the tensions and complexities within his thought see Krieger (1977).
3. For a rather dramatic example see the reactions to the recent Tarantino film “Inglorious Bastards”, depicting a fictional revenge of a dozen American-Jewish soldiers and a Jewish woman survivor in France around D-day against the Nazi military elite. *Die Welt* ended his raving review of the film with the words: “Historische Exaktheit ist eine Tugend, aber erst Phantasie bringt Befreiung”. “Historical exactness is a virtue, but it is Fantasy, first and foremost, which liberates.” The question of the legitimacy of fictional historical accounts was also addressed in the talk “In Defense of Clio’s Honor” by the Dutch novelist Nelleke Noordervliet, delivered at the closing session of the 21<sup>st</sup> Congress of Historical Sciences in Amsterdam, August 2010.
4. The prominence of this theme is manifested, and systematically discussed, in the Journal *History and Memory* (<http://www.jstor.org/page/journal/histmemo/about.html>) founded in 1989 by the Aranne School of History at Tel Aviv University, published originally by the Athenäum Verlag, Frankfurt, and later by Indiana University Press. See especially the opening article by the late Amos Funkenstein, Funkenstein (1989). See also Ginzburg (1999).
5. See most famously Anderson (1983, 1991); Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).
6. A prominent spokesman for this rapidly expanding sub-discipline is Professor Jürgen Kocka who organized a *grand theme* on this topic in the Amsterdam Congress of Historical Sciences in 2010.
7. The historiography on these topics is fast expanding in Israel (as well as among Palestinians), much of it, naturally, with ideological slants, but quite a bit also of serious value. A pioneering study has been Morris (1987). See also

- Penslar (2007), especially chapters 1,2 which deal with current Israeli historiography on these topics.
8. For a forceful argument along these lines, see for example, Craig (1989), chapter 6, pp. 119-137.
  9. Lowenthal (1985). The phrase which serves as a title of the book, as Lowenthal himself attests, comes from the start of L. P. Hartley’s novel *The Go-Between* (1953): “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (p. 7 in the Penguin ed. of 1958 and following reprints). Lowenthal’s book is an ambitious survey of the way human society (mostly Western) has dealt with its past, while being conscious of the *differences* between past and present. Chapter 5 is devoted to the problems of historical knowledge, and to the relationship between history and memory, issues we have alluded to above.
  10. For a paper which similarly stresses this function of historical teaching, while focusing also on the epistemological, psychological and educational difficulties such a role poses for the teacher (in American High Schools, in the cases studied), see Wineburg (1999). I am grateful to my daughter, Einat Heyd-Metzuyanin for calling my attention to this valuable article.
  11. For a recent article which stresses the importance of the time dimension in historical discourse and historical education see the paper delivered by Arie Wilschut in the 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Historical Sciences in Amsterdam, “A Forgotten Key Concept? Time in Teaching and Learning History”, August 24<sup>th</sup> 2010. For an earlier Dutch published version, see Wilschut (2009).
  12. In addition to the paper by Wilschut mentioned above, I wish to refer to Corfield (2007), and to her article on the Internet, Corfield (2008). I am grateful to my brother, Professor David Heyd, and to my nephew, Dr. Uriel Heyd, for turning my attention to Professor Corfield’s important work on these topics. The comments in this paragraph owe much to all these studies.
  13. The first classification is that of Fernand Braudel and his disciples in the *Annales* school, of course; the second is that of Penelope Corfield. The advantage of the latter is that it is much more flexible and dynamic, recognizing the interactions among these various “layers” of historical time. See Braudel (1958, 1969) and Corfield (2007), pp. 208-216.

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