

The Social Function of History

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“There is not, then, more than one science of man in time (history), and that science has the task of uniting the study of the dead with the study of the living.”

— Marc Bloch¹

Unlike the scientist, who in the nineteenth century was anointed with the aura of the solitary genius, the historian has, since ancient times, been thought of as a creator conditioned by his social group. The historian knows his profession thanks to routine apprenticeship under his professors. He trains in the discipline by reading the models inherited from his predecessors. He discovers the secrets of the art by analyzing the work of his colleagues. His richest sources of inspiration are the masterpieces of all times from the most diverse cultures.

The challenges imposed on him by his professional colleagues, as well as the current inescapable competition under which he suffers, are the incentives that induce him to improve himself. That is to say, from the time he chooses his vocation until he learns to carry it out, he is surrounded by inescapable social conditioning. On the one hand, he is a social product, the result of diverse collective actions; on the other hand, he is an individual driven by the desire to overcome the legacy of the past and to transform his profession by responding to the challenges of the present.

If we could transport ourselves into the different ages of the past, and draw from this images showing the functions that our ancestors assigned to rescuing the past, we would see that the tasks of history have varied. One could also notice that those tasks have been concentrated around the purpose of endowing groups of human beings with identity, cohesion, and collective consciousness.

Since ancient times the peoples that inhabited the land we now call Mexico resorted to recollections of the past to combat the

destructive influence of time upon human foundations; to knit solidarities based on common origins; to legitimate the possession of territory; to affirm identities rooted in remote traditions; to sanction established power; to validate with the prestige of the past the vindications of the present; to base in a shared past the aspiration of constructing a nation; or to give support to projects directed at the uncertainty of the future.²

In all these cases, the function of the historical record is to endow the diverse human beings that formed the tribe, the people, the fatherland, or the nation with an identity. The recovery of the past had as its ends the creation of shared social values, instilling the idea that the group or the nation had a common origin, as well as the inculcation of the conviction that the similarity of origins lent cohesion to the diverse members of the social group—a cohesion that enabled these people to face the difficulties of the present and take on the challenges of the future with confidence.

To endow a people or a nation with a common past, and to forge in this remote origin a collective identity, is perhaps the most ancient and most constant of history's social functions. It was invented long ago and remains active today. As John Updike, who remains the tribal specialist with the task of telling others what each group needs to know, says: "Who are we? What were our origins? Who were our ancestors? How did we arrive at this point or this crossroads in history?"³

This primordial function explains the great attraction that the historical account has, as well as its vast, diverse, and continually redoubled audience. It attracts most people's curiosity because historical accounts transport the reader to the mysterious place of origins and has about it the seductiveness of travel to remote places. Another attraction of historical narratives is its suggestion of offering a clarification of the beginnings of the group and thus drawing us closer to our ancestors. By building a bridge between the remote past and the uncertain present, the historical account performs the function of creating a relationship of kinship with ancestors near and distant, a feeling of continuity within the group, people, or nation.

But if on the one hand history makes us enter into the identities of the group and the search for what is our own, on the other it

forces us to recognize the diversity of human experience by opening up in us a recognition of the other; in this manner history makes us participants in experiences not lived, but with which we identify and form our sense of the plurality of human adventure.

For the student of history, immersion in the past is a constantly astonishing encounter with different ways of life influenced by different environments and cultures. Because of these special brush strokes of historical knowledge, history could be called the profession of understanding. It requires that we understand the actions and motivations of people different from ourselves. And as this task is accomplished with groups and people who are no longer present, it is also an exercise in understanding the exotic.

We can thus say that studying the past presupposes an openness to other human beings. It requires us to transport ourselves to other times, to know places never before seen, to familiarize ourselves with living conditions different from our own. In other words, the job of the historian demands a curiosity toward knowledge of the other, an inclination toward wonderment, an openness to the different, and the practice of tolerance.

It is true that not all historians display a sympathy and inclination for the unusual. But the bulk of participants in the profession, and some of its most distinguished masters, reveal that the practice of the historian, when carried out with probity, is an openness to understanding and an inclination for the remote and exotic.

At the same time as the historical imagination strives to revive what has disappeared or give permanence to what is little by little disappearing, on the other hand it is also inquiring into the inescapable transformation of the lives of individuals, groups, societies and states. It has been said that history is the study of individual and social change over time.

A good number of the tools historians have developed to understand the past detect change and transformation. We study the momentary and almost imperceptible change that the passing of the time provokes in our lives. We analyze the formidable impact of conquests, revolutions and the political and social explosions that dislocate ethnicities, classes, peoples, and nations. And in the same vein we have created refined methods to study slow changes

that over the course of hundreds and thousands of years transform geography, economic structures, mentalities, or institutions.

Thanks to the analysis of these diverse moments in time, the study of history has imposed the task of living while being conscious of the brevity of individual existence, of the awareness that our actions today rest on past experience and will extend into the future, of the conviction that we are part of the great stream of history, of a greater current along which flow nations, civilizations, and the components of the human race. By reconstructing the memory of past deeds, history fulfills a fundamental human need: it integrates the lives of individuals into the collective current of life.

On the other hand, when historical investigation analyzes the diverse events of the past, it is obligated to consider each one of them on its own terms, which are specifically the values of the time and place where it occurred. By proceeding with this criterion of authenticity, the historian grants these experiences their own significance and lasting value. In this manner, history becomes the instrument by which past actions acquire a unique meaning in general human development. In this way, individual experiences and acts born of the most withdrawn intimacy become undying testimony, human footprints that do not age or devalue in the passing of time.

Centuries ago, on observing this characteristic of historical recovery, the humanist Marsilio Ficino wrote: "History is necessary not only to make life pleasant, but also to confer upon it a moral sense. What is, in itself, mortal, gains immortality in history; what is found absent becomes present; the old is rejuvenated."⁴

On the other hand, the incessant revision that history performs upon the issues that most obsess human beings makes them relative, stripping them of the absolute value that at one time it had attempted to endow them with. Against the absolutist pretensions of those who advocate a single church, state, or social order for all humanity, history shows, with the force of human experience over the centuries, that nothing that has existed in the course of social development is definitive or eternal. Hornung warns that history: "inexorably destroys all the 'eternal' and 'absolute' values and shows the relativity of the absolute references that we struggle to establish."⁵ On contemplating the fleeting, ephemeral, and chang-

ing nature of the facts gathered by the historian, ethnographer, or analyst of social development, we become aware of the profoundly variable character of human constructions, and also come to know the unsoundness of efforts to make them immutable and lasting.

Between the end of the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries, it was common to hear in classrooms, social gatherings, or speeches wherein past events were remembered the saying that: "history is the teacher of life." By this they meant that one who read history books, or examined closely the actions that caused this or that result, could use this knowledge to avoid the mistakes of the past or to lay down rules for one's own life, grounding these in the experiences of the past. As we know, Hegel abruptly ended this pretension with the cutting response: "what experience and history teach us is that peoples and governments have never learned anything from history, and have never acted in accord with the doctrines that they could have drawn from it." In our time, Agnes Heller observed that peoples and governments: "are by no means children, so for them there is no teacher called history."⁶

As Agnes Heller shows, if it is true that we do not draw "lessons from history," we are nonetheless constantly learning historical deeds. Contemporary challenges always send us back to the crossroads of the past, and many times past occurrences serve as the "orienting principles of our present actions." But what all this means is that: "history does not teach us anything," because

"it is we who, learning from it, learn about ourselves. Historicity, history, is ourselves. We are the teachers and the disciples in this school that is our planet. ... History does not 'continue to advance,' because nothing advances in absolute terms. It is we who advance. ... Like Vico says, we can only understand the world we ourselves have created. We are not limited to probing in darkness. The beam that illuminates the dark regions of our past is the spotlight of our conscience."⁷

But even when the historian struggles to eliminate or diminish interpretations that distort the past, he is incapable of applying the brakes on the images that stream uninterrupted from the past, or that various actors or social groups produce and invent about the past. Today we know that the peoples and governments of some Latin American, Asian, and European countries while facing in the nineteenth century various threats and opportunities, imag-

ined ties of identity that sought to unite populations of different languages and cultures; invented nonexistent ancestors; produced national symbols (languages, territories, flags, and national anthems); or inaugurated monuments, museums, ceremonies, and heroic pantheons that throughout this century defined the emblems and principles of legitimacy which have guarded the nation and the national state. In this sense, those peoples and governments created "imagined communities" that later challenged the understanding and analyses of historians, sociologists, and political scientists. Standing out among the most effective instruments of the creation of collective identities are the textbook, the map of national territory, the civic calendar, the public ritual and ceremony and the use of the new media of communication.⁸

Another important social function performed by history emerges from the habits established by its very practitioners. In recent centuries, but above all in the one that is now ending, the study of history has become not only a recording of the past, but an analysis of the processes of human development made possible by the critical reconstruction of the past. As Marc Bloch has said: "Real progress came the day that skepticism became 'critical'—as Volney said—; when the objective rules, to put it in other words, worked out little by little the way of choosing between truth and lies."⁹

Through careful examination of the historical record, submitting testimony to rigorous tests of veracity and authenticity, and attending more to the how and why things happened the way they did, historical account has become a critical knowledge, a positive understanding of human experience. Historical inquiry has imposed the rule that "an affirmation cannot be made if it cannot be proven," and warned that "of all the poisons capable of corrupting testimony, falsification is the most violent."

In so far as the historian has exercised greater caution in critiquing and selecting his sources, improved his analytical methods, and acquired the techniques of the exact sciences and of the humanities, he has become the challenger of concepts of historical development based in myths, religion, providential heroes, nationalisms, and ideologies of any bent. In this manner, rather than looking for a transcendental value in human action, of legitimizing power or putting itself at the service of ideologies, the

practice of history has become a critical exercise and demystifier as part of a "rational task of analysis" as Marc Bloch has put it.¹⁰

Pressured by these demands, historical investigation has abandoned universalist interpretations of human development and dedicated itself to studying the actions of individual and collective actors in concrete form, seeking to explain human conduct according to its own logic, and trying to understand historical change through its own developments and as human processes capable of being observed with the analytical tools created by intelligence and empirical knowledge.

It can thus be said that the social function imposed on historical inquiry in our day is to make its practice a rational, critical, intelligent, and comprehensive exercise. That is to say, it has been turned into an empirical study, submitted to the rules of proof and error proper to scientific understanding.

Yet even while historians of this century sometimes dreamed of putting historical understanding on the same level as science, after unfortunate experiences many wound up recognizing that the role of history is not to produce knowledge capable of being proven or refuted through empirical scientific procedure. For unlike the scientist, the historian, as well as the ethnographer or the sociologist, knows that it is not possible to hermetically isolate the object of his study because human actions are intrinsically linked to the social cohort that shapes it. And unlike the positivist historian, who thought he could understand events as they effectively happened in the past, the present historian has accepted the idea that objectivity is an interactive relationship between the inquiry of the investigator and the object that he studies: "The validity of this definition arises more from persuasion than from evidence; but without evidence there is no historical account worthy of the name."¹¹

Aside from the differences in focus and practice that now divide historians and the schools of historiography, there is a consensus that the main objective of history is the production of understanding by exercising reasoned explanation.

In spite of the pressures and all that experimental sciences have brought to bear on the field of history, the members of this profession have decided not to close the door on experiences that come

from art, the humanities, and common sense. After the lengthy and sometimes heated debates about the scientific methods that lead to true knowledge, the teachers of the profession have proposed to practice with rigor some basic rules. The following ones stand out among them:

Ignore those who want to confine history within a rigid straight jacket of determinism, be it Marxist, structuralist, or functionalist. Avoid falling into monocausal explanations. Keep a distance from the banalities of the antiquarian who invests his time in the past for the sole reason that the facts which repose there are covered by the dust of time. Reject the academic pigeonholes that have divided history into fields, areas, disciplines, and specializations that fragment the understanding of social development.

Tie the history of material life, social history, and cultural history to political history, the analysis of deep structures of power and one of the fields of understanding most neglected in recent decades. Restore the lives of human beings, be they great or small, to the history they were expelled from by the *isms* imposed throughout this century.

Impose, as an essential norm of communication, clarity of language and expression. Fight the tendency that seeks to divide us into groups progressively smaller, more specialized, and isolated. Restore, in the end, the central function of history which is to explain social development.¹² Perhaps this can thus be reduced to showing that with the force of reliable facts and reasoned explanation, historical analysis generates positive knowledge that helps us to understand the behavior, ideas, and legacies of human beings.

Notes

1. See Enrique Florescano, *Memoria mexicana*, (México, 1994). There is also an English edition: *Memory, Myth and Time in Mexico* (Texas University Press, 1993).
2. John Updike, "El escritor como conferenciante," *La Jornada Semanal*, 19 February 1989.
3. Cited by Erwin Panofsky, *El signifiaco en las artes visuales*, (Madrid, 1991), 38–39.
4. Erik Hornung, *Les dieux de l'Egypte* (Paris, 1992), 233.

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5. Agnes Heller, *Teoría de la historia* (Mexico 1989), 165. The preceding reference to Hegel is also drawn from here.
6. *Ibid.*, 179–80.
7. See Josefina Vázquez, *Nacionalismo y educación en México* (México, 1970); David A. Brading, *Los orígenes del nacionalismo mexicano* (México, Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1972); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1991); E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (London, 1990).
8. Bloch, *Introducción al estudio de la historia* (Mexico, 1952), 166.
9. *Ibid.*, 16.
10. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994), 260–61.
11. Lawrence Stone, “Una doble función. Las tareas en que se deben empeñar los historiadores en el futuro.” *El País*. 29 July, 1993.