

In Defense of History¹

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Let me begin my defense with a word or two of explanation. To start with, let's look at this word history. Of late there has been a certain semantic change, a new, idiomatic, increasingly common use of the word history, which I can perhaps best exemplify by a familiar scene from a movie in which the heavy, the tycoon or the gangster chief, contemptuously dismisses his cast-off mistress with the words "you're history." The common phrase "that's history" now conveys the general meaning that it is, whatever it may be, of no relevance to present events, concerns, or purposes. History may have some antiquarian interest, or may provide entertainment, but no more.

This lack of concern with the past, this dismissal of the past as something unimportant, at most entertaining, and in the hands of most professional historians not even that, has precedents. Ancient India offers the example of an advanced, sophisticated society that did not think that history mattered, and took no trouble to record it. As serious Indian history-writing began with the coming of Islam, most of what we know about pre-Islamic India is either from fragmentary evidence or outside visitors, not from narrative historiography.

We find the same a-historical approach in rabbinic and diaspora Judaism. From the end of the ancient Jewish state until the impact of the Renaissance on Italian and French Jews, there is an almost total lack of historical writing, even a rejection of history. Thus Maimonides, a man of wide-ranging intellectual pursuits, condemns the preoccupation with the events of the past as of no value and of no interest. "[These books] neither possess wisdom nor yield profit for the body, but are merely a waste of time."² This lack of interest in history among Jews of that period and of that background is the more remarkable if we reflect

¹ Read 15 November 1997.

² As cited in S.W. Baron, "The Historical Outlook of Maimonides," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 6 (1934–35), 7–8.

that some of them were living among peoples with a very strong interest in history, like the Romans or the Arabs, and were in other respects profoundly influenced by the cultures in which they lived. Historians, in those days, were employed by the state or the church. Since the Jews had neither, they had no history.

I used the word relevance, and spoke of the dismissal of history as “not relevant.” But there is another danger even greater than that of irrelevance, and that is the danger of relevance. The word relevant has acquired new and menacing overtones and undertones of meaning in our time. History, according to this view, is admissible, even useful, provided it is limited to “relevant history.” Here we confront something worse than neglect. I shall try to make my point clear with two quotations. One will certainly be familiar, the other probably not. The first comes from Mr. Henry Ford, who once observed, with that brevity that is conventionally the soul of wit and sometimes also of its converse, that “history is bunk.” Most historians would agree with that proposition as applied to some of the work of some of their colleagues. But, as a judgment of the profession as a whole and of the subject matter with which it deals, most of us would find it excessive.

My second quotation, probably less familiar, comes from a government department of education, laying down the purpose of the study and teaching of history in schools. “Its purpose is to strengthen the nationalist and patriotic sentiments in the hearts of the people, because knowledge of the nation’s past is one of the most important incentives to patriotic behavior.”

The passage in question comes from a circular of the Syrian government department of education.³ But that is purely coincidental. I deal with the Middle East, so I come across Middle Eastern documents. I have no doubt that the sentiments expressed in this Syrian ministerial circular would be echoed in many other countries, and were indeed echoed in this country in the debate on national standards for the teaching of history.

These two quotations, from Henry Ford and some unknown Syrian ministry of education official, exemplify the twin dangers against which, I suggest, history is in need of defense: disuse and misuse—or, putting it differently, neglect and perversion. The two global superpowers that confronted each other during the cold war in a sense exemplified these two dangers. In the United States we have perhaps the greatest example of the neglect of history. Here, despite an enormous

³ Decree of 30 May 1947. As cited in Anwar G. Chejne, “The Use of History by Modern Arab Writers,” *Middle East Journal* (1960), 392–93.

historical establishment comprising vast numbers of tenured historians organized in departments and societies and producing libraries of books, one cannot but be struck by the lack of a sense of history in the society, in the public discourse, and even, more specifically, in the conduct of government.

One sees this for example in the schools, even in primary and secondary education, where we read in one report after another that high school seniors cannot place Abraham Lincoln within a century, and have the vaguest ideas about major events in the history of their own country, not to speak of others. A recent quiz in an undergraduate class in a respected university revealed that fewer than half the students could say when World War II began and when it ended.

This happens partly through simple neglect and partly because history has been, so to speak, colonized, taken up and subsumed in the social sciences, the practitioners of which (let me be cautious in putting this), often have a somewhat different attitude to evidence from that of historians. One notices it also in the media and more generally in the public debate, where references to history are few and far between and, as often as not, inaccurate.

I would point here to the contrast with the Middle East. During the war between Iraq and Iran (1980–88), propagandists on both sides made frequent allusion—rapid, incomplete, passing allusion—to such matters as the reign of the Caliph Yazid (680–83) and the massacre of Kerbela (680). These and other events of the seventh and eighth centuries were immediately familiar to the mass audiences to whom those propaganda broadcasts and statements were addressed. Their knowledge of history may not have been very accurate, but it was certainly very detailed. One doesn't quite see modern Western politicians or propagandists making a point by allusion to the Lombard League or the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy, approximately contemporary to those events.

One sees also the lack of a sense of history in government. Time and time again I have chatted with government officials concerned with the problems of the Middle East. They are always highly educated and often remarkably competent, with a detailed and intimate knowledge of the problem with which they are involved from the moment of their own involvement. But they sometimes display surprising gaps in their knowledge of what went before.

The opposite extreme, of misuse rather than disuse, is exemplified by the other party to the cold war, the Soviet Union and its satellites, which regulated or even dictated what might or might not be written and taught. In accordance with the general doctrines of that society, the state and the party maintained control of the means of production, dis-

tribution and exchange, of historical information and ideas, as well as of other things. It has been remarked that a new present and still more a new future require a new past, and constant readjustment was therefore necessary. This applied not only to the recent past but even to the remoter past. A Soviet historian tells us that the “working masses” of the Byzantine Empire saw the roving Slavic tribes as “their allies and deliverers.”⁴ This somewhat implausible assertion was clearly not based on any kind of evidence, but it served an obvious political purpose and conformed very well to Soviet-style political correctness.

The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and elsewhere brought another historiographic problem. It soon became clear that Communist rule had acted as a kind of deep-freeze, in which historical notions and ideas and attitudes were frozen stiff and then, with the ending of the Communist controls, thawed out. In Russia they thawed out in 1917, with many of the attitudes and anxieties of that era. The Yugoslav peoples thawed out, roughly, into 1945, with the attitudes, the memories, the prejudices, and the hostilities of that year fresh as they were at the moment when they were frozen. And sometimes the freeze can last a very long time. It has been well said that the Serbs are still fighting their traditional enemies, the sultan and the pope.

There is of course a wide range of what one might call self-serving history, not only Communist and nationalist but many other kinds. There is also the less common but perhaps more interesting phenomenon of self-flagellating history, which raises psychological as well as other problems. In its noblest form, I suppose, self-flagellating history may be found in the historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament, in expressions of moral indignation at all the wicked things we—not they, not you, but we—have done. More recently this self-flagellating type of history is taking other forms. In part one might describe it as healthy self-criticism, in part as a kind of neurotic self-hate, but perhaps more than either of these, a continuation in another form of the rather arrogant, self-centered historiographic approach of earlier times.

Again I take the American example, though one could readily name others. It is no longer fashionable or acceptable for American historians to insist that the United States is the center of the world and the source of all that is good, from freedom to motherhood to apple pie. It is, however, perfectly acceptable to insist with the same self-centered arrogance that the United States is the source of all evil. Only we make mistakes or commit crimes, because—by unstated implication—only

⁴ E.A. Belyaev, *Arabs, Islam and the Arab Caliphate in the Early Middle Ages* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 9.

we make decisions or cause events. The rest of the world is passive and inert, and its fate is determined by what we do. In this sense, the currently fashionable self-flagellatory school of history is, at the very least, as arrogant and self-centered as the more traditional kind of self-serving history.

What, then, is there to defend, against what attack, and how? Let me begin with a defense against neglect, against disuse. Here I can do no more than offer the usual apologia for my craft and that of my colleagues: the need for memory, the dangers of deprivation of memory—in the individual with no memory, amnesia, with distorted memories, neurosis. The group, no less than the individual, needs some form of collective memory and record. Even running a business or selling a commodity requires the keeping of records, preferably accurate. A balance-sheet, for example, is a historical narrative. If it is missing or inaccurate, the enterprise faces grave dangers; if it is fraudulent, those dangers include indictment.

But even a balance-sheet, while remaining within the law, can be cooked and served in various ways, as any businessman knows. Let us look at the way in which historical records or narratives are cooked and served.

Here I turn from the dangers of disuse to the dangers of the misuse of history, by those who believe that history must serve a purpose. They agree that history has an important place in any system of education, but have their own ideas on why, and more especially how, history should be studied and taught.

The discussion of misuse raises further questions—by whom? For whom? Under what auspices? For what purpose and interest? A historian has a natural preference for answering this question historically, and tracing the stages. He might begin with the tribe and the tribal cult, reflected in ancient narratives, both tribal and religious. Such narratives are of several kinds, the most ancient and traditional being what one might call the bardic or mythological. From remote antiquity, feuding tribes had rival sagas sung by competing bards. Something of the sort continues to the present day. There is a parallel religious, or more precisely sectarian, historiography. The more old-fashioned approach to religion has been admirably summed up in three short phrases, “I’m right, you’re wrong, go to hell.” A good deal of religious, communal, and national historiography is of this kind.

In more modern times, there are new threats to history from what I am tempted to call the fashion tsars of the ideological hem-line—those who determine what ideas shall be worn this season—what length, what style, and what cut. The set of rules known as “political

correctness" provides one version of this. There are others. According to some currently fashionable epistemological notions, good evidence and bad evidence are meaningless terms. All evidence is, so to speak, born free and equal. And since there is no such thing as truth, there is no such thing as authenticity; these are irrelevant and meaningless, even misleading, concepts. This approach serves a double purpose; it makes it possible both to discredit good evidence and to validate bad evidence, and this helps enormously in the process of falsification. We might call these "catahistorians," in contrast to the so-called metahistorians, who reflected on the nature of historical reasoning, and sometimes—the more rash among them—tried to formulate rules governing the historical process itself. I use the Greek prefix "cata" as in cataclysm, catastrophe and catalepsy.

What are the media by means of which historical narrative is reshaped and redirected?

The oldest, the most traditional, is of course mythology. The term mythology as used at the present day covers a number of different things—primitive science, to explain such natural phenomena as birth and death and the rotation of the seasons; primitive religion, to answer questions about man, God, time and eternity; and—our present concern—primitive history, to confirm identity, encourage loyalty, and, through legitimacy, to justify authority. The primary and most basic focus of history and religion is thus the tribe and the tribal cult. There are many surviving examples of these, expressing the historical self-image of the tribe and the religious projection of that self-image. In time the tribe develops into a people, then a state, the cult into a church or equivalent, and these in turn may subdivide into parties and factions and sects, each with its own version of history, designed to prove the rightness of its actions and the correctness of its beliefs, in contrast with other groups and cults with which it may come into contact and, usually, into conflict.

Historical narrative in the form of mythology—to which we must now add counter-mythology—still flourishes. In free societies, it survives primarily in elementary education and popular entertainment. In such societies, serious historians have long since learned to look with suspicion on any version of history in which their side is always right and its opponents are always wrong, and, since it is not in the nature of human entities to be invariably right, to question the hypotheses on which such narratives are based. In unfree societies such questioning is rarely permitted, and a more or less mythological version prevails unchallenged.

There are many such mythologies at the present time. One partic-

ular brand is what is sometimes called salvation-history, history presented as the coming of the truth that saves mankind, or at least part of it. The best known are of course the religious versions of history, each presenting the essential truth of its own brand of salvation, which washes whiter than the others. To these we may add the modern secular versions, liberal, Communist, nationalist, patriotic, and the rest. This kind of history may also be disseminated through preaching and teaching, song and balladry, and through religious and national commemorative ceremonies. The massacre of the Prophet's kin at Kerbela, mourned every year by the Shī'a, has enormously powerful evocative impact. The great battle of Kossovo in 1389, in which the Serbs were defeated by the conquering Ottomans, is another example of remembered suffering.

Sometimes a mythology becomes an orthodoxy. This term, from two Greek words meaning the right idea, was first used by Plato, and has come to mean a systematized statement of officially sponsored truth. There is of course historical orthodoxy in many societies, deviation from which can be dangerous and in certain circumstances even fatal—professionally in democracies, physically in dictatorships. For the dissemination and, where appropriate, enforcement of orthodoxies, modern technology has greatly strengthened traditional methods; propaganda, indoctrination, and an extreme form known at one time as brainwashing.

Historical mythologies are extraordinarily persistent. The French retreat from Moscow in 1812 was presented in traditional French schoolbooks as due entirely to the bad weather. It wasn't the Russians who defeated the Grande Armée; it was the Russian winter. Serious scholarship, even in France, eventually came to the conclusion that this was an oversimplification and that the Russian armed forces may also have had something to do with the retreat and defeat of the Grande Armée. This has even appeared in French school textbooks. Nevertheless, among Frenchmen other than trained historians, the myth that Napoleon's defeat in Russia was due to the weather and only the weather remains extraordinarily vigorous.

How does one actually set about distorting history? The best and most effective method of course is invention, supported by fabrication. One invents events, and if convenient or necessary one fabricates the evidence to support one's inventions. A fabrication may be personal and deliberate; it may be collective and unconscious. Both kinds can usually be detected by critical historical scholarship.

There are some celebrated historical fabrications. The Donations of Constantine for example, a document said to have been issued by the

emperor Constantine to Sylvester, bishop of Rome, was used as the basis for the temporal power of the popes in the city of Rome. Purporting to be of the fourth century, first appearing in the eighth century, it was finally demonstrated to be a forgery in the fifteenth century. It probably had the longest run so far of any historical fabrication.

There are others. Under the auspices of the American Philosophical Society I may mention the statements attributed to Benjamin Franklin denouncing Jews and Catholics. These first appeared in the 1930s, when the international atmosphere was propitious to such fabrications. There are the so-called Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the Talât Pasha telegrams, and others of the same kind. The Protocols are by now pretty much discarded in the Western world, but they still flourish in other parts. My own copy, entitled *Jewish Conspiracy*, was printed in Tehran in 1985, and came to me by courtesy of the "Islamic Propagation Organization" in that city.

The misuser of history can to a considerable extent serve his purpose simply by defining the topic, that is to say, of what, of where, of whom, of when, he is writing the history. Take even a simple matter like the starting point. One has to start somewhere if one is going to write a book or an article or give a lecture on an historical topic, and the choice may in some measure predetermine the result. Any starting point is necessarily in some degree artificial. History is a seamless garment; periodization is a convenience of the historian, not a fact of the historical process. By choosing carefully, one can slant history without any resort to actual falsehood. For example, a writer on relations between the United States and Japan can start with Hiroshima, or he can start with Pearl Harbor. Even precisely identical narratives of events would look very different, if they start with the one or the other.

Another example is the Crusades. Nowadays it has become fashionable to present the Crusades as an early example of aggressive, predatory Western imperialism against the Muslim East. But how did the previously Christian East become Muslim? If we go back a few centuries we might notice that the Crusade was preceded by the Jihād—that is, a similar invasion moving in the opposite direction—and one might not unreasonably describe the Crusade as a long-delayed, limited Christian response to the Muslim Jihād. Again, it depends when we start.

And where. In choosing a topic, the historian must define the area as well of the period with which he is concerned, and this too will affect his perspective and may slant his result. Will he write the history of England, or of Britain? Of Denmark, or of Scandinavia? Of the Turks, or of the Ottoman Empire? These very different examples are but three among many.

Much may be determined—or at least suggested—by the simple choice and definition of the topic. Latterly, there have been many histories of resistance in Nazi-occupied Europe; there are few histories of submission and collaboration.

To some extent the result is predetermined by the accessibility of evidence—a fact of course known to the historian. Take for example the history of a conflict between two countries, one a closed society with sealed archives, the other an open society with open debate and open archives. Inevitably the historian will study the subject on the basis of what is available and accessible, and even without any intention to distort, he may well arrive at a rather slanted, one-sided picture, usually to the advantage of those whose archives are closed and who permit no adverse point of view to be expressed. The Cold War furnishes examples of that. So does the modern Middle East.

I spoke of invention sustained by fabrication as one major form of falsification. The counterpart of that, equally effective, is amnesia sustained by concealment—the unconscious forgetting of disagreeable episodes, or the deliberate suppression of shameful memories, sustained by the destruction of evidence. One thinks for example of the massive shredding of documents in the Paris prefecture of police at the moment of liberation, or the more recent example of the attempted destruction of Nazi era deposit records by a Swiss bank. These exemplify what one might call planned amnesia.

There are other less obvious examples. One such is slavery. Slavery is a very disagreeable fact in human history, not just American history. American historians faced this honorably, recognizing the fact, discussing it, documenting it, analyzing it without any attempt to offer excuses. It was not embellished, as it was not long ago at an African History Conference, where one of the most famous African slave traders was described as running “an intercontinental employment agency.” There are societies in which slavery has been a fact of life, in some of them very recently, in some even to the present day. But the subject is taboo. Not long ago a graduate student who wanted to work on slavery in the medieval Middle East was strongly advised, not by any Middle Eastern authority but by a grant-giving body in this country, to choose some “less provocative” subject. To study the history of the Middle East without slavery would be as meaningful as to study the history of the American South or the Roman Empire without slavery. Nevertheless, it is widely done. Many books, indeed I suppose most general books on Middle Eastern history, either don’t mention it or gloss over it, and research in that field is discouraged in a number of ways. The amnesia of the Nazi era is an obvious modern example, and here I must

say that the Germans have been more honest in confronting the past than some of their former allies and collaborators in other countries.

Having fabricated your history, how do you put it across? This varies from country to country and from regime to regime. The most effective method of promulgating falsified history is of course coercion. This was universal in the Soviet Bloc, and although it is no longer applied there, it still persists in other parts of the world, where only one version of historical events is permitted, other versions being forbidden and punishable. Even in a democratic state the use of coercion is still a possibility, by selective legislation. For example the *Loi Gayssot* in France makes it a criminal offense to deny that the Holocaust took place. There is no such law either in the United States or in the United Kingdom, any more than there are laws making it criminal to claim that the earth is flat. Anyone who wishes to argue that the earth is flat is free to do so both in Britain and in America. In France, and also in Germany, which has a similar law for a similar reason, there is a somewhat different history. One can easily explain and one may try to justify the *Loi Gayssot*, but one cannot dispute that it constitutes a limitation on freedom of expression, and may be a dangerous precedent. I note in passing that legislation has been proposed in the French parliament that would extend the same limitation to other events in earlier history.

Coercion is the best method of falsifying history, but it is not always possible. The second best is intimidation. This can be quite effective. A number of years ago a history professor at the University of California at Los Angeles published a book that displeased some elements in the community. They picketed his lectures and his publishers and blew up his house. He and his family were in the house at the time. Miraculously they escaped. This seems to be an extreme and for most people unacceptable form of historical argumentation.

One step further down after coercion and intimidation come a number of methods that may be grouped under the heading of pressure. There is social pressure, through colleagues and neighbors and friends, which makes it difficult or even painful to express opinions that go against what is currently acceptable or fashionable. And of course there is material pressure, by the manipulation of the granting or withholding of visas to visit one or another country and research permits to work in them, as well as more professional matters such as grants, fellowships, appointments and promotions. All of these are frequently used as weapons to secure preferential treatment for one or other school of historical thinking or, to be precise, historical teaching and writing.

More generally, there is education, used in various ways. Educa-

tion can be a very effective method to obtain some measure of control of historiography. This is illustrated in the argument in the United States over the so-called national standards, drawn up by a committee appointed under the auspices of the Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities, to set standards in both United States history and world history. This gave rise to a passionate and ongoing debate as to the nature of these standards and what they are trying to teach our children.

Beyond education, perhaps even more important than education, there is entertainment. What after all do most people know about history, people—a growing majority—who have not studied history and who are not concerned with historical accuracy? Some years ago, the French historian Marc Ferro⁵ observed that the idea that most of these people have of history is derived from two major sources: from the moldering relics of their primary school instruction in the subject, and from the cinema. These are the two major sources, I will not say of historical information, but of historical perceptions and attitudes.

The misrepresentation of the past in the cinema is probably the most fertile and effective source of such misinformation at the present time—certainly since the disappearance of the Soviet educational system, and I am not at all sure that it couldn't compare favorably even with that, in terms of skill and effectiveness in historical distortion and perversion. I have not seen the films about the Kennedy assassination and about Nixon and will therefore not discuss them. But I have seen some others. There was for example a film about Robin Hood that contained some very remarkable pieces of historical data. There was a Saracen who visited England in the twelfth century, in itself highly improbable, and was able to speak English. I set aside that it was—inevitably—American English, but the mere fact of a Saracen speaking English was a little odd. Even odder was that the Saracen was black and finally, being from a much more advanced civilization than that of the native English, he was able to dazzle them with a number of devices, one of which was a magnifying glass—one of the very few things in which Europe was more advanced than the Islamic world at that time.

With all these dangers one might indeed ask "Why bother?" Aren't we better off without history, since it is so subject to perversion, distortion, misrepresentation, and the rest? Let the Serbs forget about Kosovo. Let the rest of us forget about our past grievances.

If that were the real choice, I might even be tempted to agree,

⁵ Marc Ferro, *Comment on raconte l'Histoire aux enfants à travers le monde entier* (Paris: Payot, 1981).

although I think I could resist the temptation. But it isn't the real choice, for two reasons. In the first place, it would mean leaving history to the falsifiers, unchallenged and unchecked, because they will not desist even if we do. And in the second place, more serious, we cannot abandon history, because whatever we may say about it, the historical process continues—not just versions or narratives or whatever may be the fashionable term, but historical processes which continue to shape the present and affect the future. We stand a better chance of being able to understand what is happening now and influence what will happen next if we have some knowledge of what happened in the past.

It is by now generally accepted that the sciences and the social sciences, in addition to their intrinsic intellectual merits, serve useful and practical purposes. The one may provide us with new tools and weapons; the other may, with luck, help us to live with their consequences. It was believed in the past, there may still be some remote and isolated places where it is believed in the present, that for the humanities their own intrinsic intellectual merit is sufficient, and their study is its own more than adequate reward. By now this is very much a minority point of view, but it deserves to be reiterated. Through philosophy and history we may hope to achieve some understanding of our place in the universe and of our experience in the past. Through the study of language and literature, in themselves historical records, we may be able to receive and be enriched by some understanding of what the great minds of the past have achieved, the experiences our predecessors recorded and transmitted for our guidance. In this way, the study of the humanities has at all times made an essential contribution to the refinement of the mind, the ennoblement of the soul, and, by these means, the education of the young to take their place fittingly in a civilized society. These purposes, and the values that underlie them, are now under heavy attack, and greatly in need of defense.

It must be admitted that history, for the educator, is in many ways an unsatisfactory subject. It is unreliable, changeable, inconsistent, fragmentary, often contradictory. Yet it is precisely for those reasons that it is valuable, in that it accurately reflects the human predicament, and is therefore an essential ingredient of our education, of our perception of ourselves, of our understanding not only of our past but of our present and whatever future may await us.

The past does not change, but our perception of the past is constantly changing, and every generation re-examines the past in the light of its own concerns, and to the extent of its own capabilities.

The rewriting of the past derives from several sources, some relatively straightforward, others complex and difficult. The former in-

clude the discovery of new evidence and the development of new techniques of enquiry. In our own day, the advance of archeological, epigraphical, archival, and documentary studies has vastly increased the amount of evidence at our disposal, while the progress of both the linguistic and social sciences has given us new methodologies for the exploitation of this new evidence. A very large part of current research is concerned with these tasks.

There is however another kind of revision of history, arising from changing conceptions of the very nature of the historical process, and the consequent enrichment of the content of historical research and writing. In its earliest and simplest form, history was just a chronicle of political and military events—the so-called “drum and trumpet” school of historiography. In the course of time, historians extended their studies to include cultural and intellectual, religious and scientific, economic and social history, all of which enormously increased the range, complexity, and value of historical study and exposition.

In our own day another new dimension of comparable importance has been added—gender history. This is sometimes dismissed as a fad or fashion of the politically correct, and in some hands it is indeed no more than that. But there is a lot more to gender history, and for the politically correct it can pose agonizing dilemmas. It is of course incorrect to say anything positive about Western civilization, or anything negative about non-Western civilizations—so how does one deal with the inescapable fact that the position of women in Christendom, though far from equality, was vastly better than in most other societies where polygamy and concubinage were legally and socially acceptable? The resulting contortions can sometimes be quite entertaining.

More seriously, there is a kind of revision of history, widely practiced today, that arises not from the opportunities but from the needs—or the passions—of our time. Basically, all research means putting questions, and historical research means putting questions to the past, preferably without torture, and trying to find answers there. The questions we put are necessarily those suggested to us by our own times and pre-occupations, and these differ from generation to generation and from group to group.

It is inevitable and legitimate that this should be so. What is neither legitimate nor inevitable is that not only the questions we put to the past but also the answers we find there should be determined by our present concerns and needs. This can lead, particularly under authoritarian regimes, but also in free societies under pressures of various kinds, to the falsification of the past, in order to serve some present purpose.

Much of what purports to be history at the present time, in much of the world, is of this kind. We live in an age when immense energies and resources are devoted to the falsification of the past, and it is therefore all the more important, in those places where the past can be researched and discussed freely and objectively, to pursue this work to the limit of our abilities. It has been argued that complete objectivity is impossible, since scholars are human beings, with their own loyalties and biases. This is no doubt true, but does not affect the issue. To borrow an analogy, any surgeon will admit that complete asepsis is also impossible, but one does not, for that reason, perform surgery in a sewer. There is no need to write or teach history in an intellectual sewer either.

We should have no illusions about this. While some of us may prefer to forget history or to rewrite history to serve some present purpose, the facts of the past, as distinct from the record or perception of the past, cannot be changed. And the consequences of those facts cannot be averted by ignorance or misrepresentation, whether self-serving, or, as sometimes happens nowadays, compassionate.

In our own time there has been a considerable change in our perception of the scope and scale and content of history. In bygone times, it was considered sufficient if a country, a society, or a community concerned itself with its own history. In these days, when almost every action or policy has a global dimension, we know better. We also have a broader and deeper idea of what constitutes our own history.

The rapid changes of recent years have forced us—sometimes painfully—to realize that the world is a much more diverse place than we had previously thought. As well as other countries and nations, there are also other cultures and civilizations, separated from us by differences far greater than those of nationality or even of language. In the modern world, we may find ourselves obliged to deal with societies professing different religions, nurtured on different scriptures and classics, formed by different experiences, and cherishing different aspirations. Not a few of our troubles at the present time spring from a failure to recognize or even see these differences, an inability to achieve some understanding of the ways of what were once remote and alien societies. They are now no longer remote, and they should not be alien.

Nor, for that matter, should we be alien to them. Between the various countries and cultures that make up this world, the forces of modernization are creating, however much we may resist it, a global community in which we are all in touch with, and dependent on, one another. Even within each country, modernization is destroying the barriers that previously divided us into neatly segregated communities,

each living its own life in its own way, suffering minimal contacts with the outsider. All that is ending, and we must learn to live together. Unfortunately, intercommunication has not kept pace with interaction, and we are still deplorably ignorant of each other's ways and values and aspirations.

Ignorance is of course not the only problem. There are real differences, which must be recognized and accepted; real issues, which must be confronted and resolved. But even real differences are exacerbated, real problems are aggravated, by ignorance, and a host of difficulties may reasonably be ascribed to ignorance alone.

Our education today should be concerned with the development of many cultures, in all their diversity; with the great ideas that inspire them and the texts in which those ideas are enshrined, with the achievements they made possible, and with the common heritage their followers and successors share.

History is the collective memory, the guiding experience of human society, and we still badly need that guidance.