Twilight of History

Review Number: 2101

Publish date: Thursday, 4 May, 2017

Author: Shlomo Sand

ISBN: 9781786630223

Date of Publication: 2017

Price: £20.00

Pages: 304pp.

Publisher: Verso Books

Publisher url: <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2428-twilight-of-history>

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Beverley Southgate

Shlomo Sand is no stranger to controversy. His earlier works include *The Invention of the Jewish People*, *The Invention of the Land of Israel*, and *How I Stopped Being a Jew* (1); and in the first of these he challenged what he called ‘the picture of an unbroken, linear Jewish history’ which is designed to justify the establishment of Israel ‘by invoking claims of ancestral lands, historical rights, and millennia-old national yearnings’. He insisted on the need to replace that widely-accepted account with ‘a radical re-evaluation of the past’ entailing an altogether different narrative – a narrative that would provide a much-needed alternative perspective from which to engage in contemporary politics. That message in its original Hebrew version met with approval from many journalists and other readers, but not, as Sand describes, from ‘authorised’ historians, who fell on it ‘with academic fury’.

The book now under review is (in part anyway) an attempt to describe his own journey to his current personal (and political) position, and it is unlikely much to change attitudes, whether positive or negative, towards him; for what he describes is how he came to challenge the historiographical certainties believed to underpin Israeli territorial claims. Not unlike Robert Rosenstone, then, in his recent *Adventures of a Postmodern Historian* (2), Sand aims to present an intellectual autobiography in relation to the evolution of historiography in his own lifetime. So he describes his own development from being a confident young historian, with no qualms about his subject’s validity, to being a questioning sceptical relativist, with doubts about the nature and the role of history for the future. And there are, as he makes clear, important pedagogical implications: he has lost an earlier belief in his own ability to transmit a reliable account of the past to his students; and by implication, maybe fellow historians might profitably question their own ability to do so.

So this is an avowedly personal book that breaks ‘with the marks of pretentious objectivism’ that still characterise much supposedly ‘scientific’ history (p. xxii). In his first chapter, he challenges conventional chronology and a ‘myth of origins’ that hinges on a Eurocentric account of the Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian traditions. Those traditions, he argues, have been, and still are, improperly appropriated on the assumption of a progressive development from antiquity through the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and modernity. Such historiographical conventions need questioning, and in particular the facile categorisations and periodisations that are imposed on the past and implicitly exclude non-European dimensions. It is

noteworthy, he suggests, that even Edward Said, who can hardly be accused of Eurocentrism, felt it appropriate to trace his Orientalist theme directly back to the ancient Greeks; and such appeals to classical origins are ubiquitous. Sand cites *inter alia* the case of Thomas Jefferson who, as a founding father of the American nation, claimed direct descent from the Graeco-Roman 'mother culture'. But history, Sand insists, does not 'in fact progress on a continuous linear trajectory' that might justify such claims (p. 44); and he attempts to disrupt that conventional Mediterranean-based narrative by tracing developments from the 'hydraulic' cultures of Sumeria, Egypt, and China, and on through technological innovations (including especially the heavy plough) of northern regions.

There would surely be few historians now who would deny the hitherto Eurocentric emphasis of their discipline, but Sand seems to me to push his argument too far when he criticises Christian Meier in *From Athens to Auschwitz* (3) for setting his perplexity about European civilisation's descent to Auschwitz in the context of Athenian rationalism. Meier took some pains to explain his focus on 'the special path' of European history, and he was hardly using 'rationalist Athens' as 'an escape route' (p. 50)? And it is noteworthy that, in his later discussion of cultural history, Sand himself cites Herodotus as 'first historian of culture' (p. 70, n. 11) – resorting again (as who wouldn't?) to that questionable Mediterranean-based narrative.

Chapter two purports to be concerned with 'escaping from politics' – something that would appear to be impossible, and that Sand himself clearly has no intention of attempting. He describes the nation-state as apparently enjoying a quasi-autonomous life and agency: it holds the levers of power, in the form of cultural and institutional establishments (including education), and can thus control the public memories required for individual and national identities. Those memories – and their parallel, and sometimes more numerous, forgettings – have of course varied over time, being generated and perpetuated, adapted and replaced, through the medium of histories. Which highlights the importance of the history of historiography itself, and it's that that Sand examines with particular reference to his time in France.

For him a particular influence there was the *Annales* school, an examination of which reveals a subject of ever-changing emphases – with a focus moving from politics to 'culture' in its many manifestations. He refers here to a succession of specific historians, both well- and lesser-known, each with their own contribution, and he appropriately describes his own work at this point as 'an impressionistic sketch' (p. 106). Wide-ranging and diffuse, it would have benefited from a much clearer argumentative structure to encourage greater coherence. But what does seem of wider significance is the general point that all the historians he describes represent some form of 'politics': all 'history', that is, is ultimately ideological, in the sense that it encapsulates a 'public memory' which justifies and confirms existing power structures; so that historians themselves (unless revisionists, presumably), whether consciously or not, collude in the maintenance of a *status quo*.

It appears, then, to be impossible to effect the escape from politics that Sand's chapter-heading envisages; and, more confusingly it seems that the author wouldn't really want to do so. Indeed, he is scathing about historians who appear indifferent to what is going on immediately around them – such as those who, on the very eve of the Second World War, unconcernedly wrote about 'fragments of a remote past' while determinedly distancing themselves from their own precarious time (p. 81); or who later long turned a blind eye to such events as collaboration with Nazism during the war – events which they considered best forgotten and excised from any historical record. (It was, he observes, not historians but novelists and film-makers who kept the memory of such things alive.)

That leads Sand to confront his own time and place – contemporary Israel – and here he reiterates his own political commitments. Unsurprisingly, then, chapter three – for all its title, 'Probing the truth of the past' – is effectively a continuation of the theme of politics. Admittedly, we start with some consideration of historical truth – a matter that Sand relates once more to his own life. He explains how his experience at the University of Tel Aviv led him to realise how teachers came to be convinced of their own competence in the search for historical knowledge; so that they transmitted the belief that, with disciplinary rules in place, it

was 'possible to present a reliable and solid history' (p. 126). The professionalisation of the subject in the early 19th century had marked its transition from a purely literary genre to a 'science'; and thenceforward it had become incumbent on historians to provide reliable foundations for coherent national identities. Quite naturally, and with sufficient inducements, they became convinced of their own ability to do so; and that conviction largely remains in place.

The assumption of their new role, though, once more directly involves historians in politics; Sand describes their newly-defined discipline as 'a new *political* theology' (p. 145, my emphasis). An elaboration of that involves referring to practitioners from Mesopotamia, Egypt and China, through the Greeks to a long line of pre-modern writers. And at this point, the 'impatient' reader is invited to skip the several pages of what are little more than encyclopaedia-style entries. It is hard to see for just what readership all this might be intended.

Again, though, there is an important – if not very original – point that does emerge. Having reverted to the subject of chapter one, with a section on 'The 'Myth-story' of national territories', Sand identifies the crisis of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 as a turning-point for historiography. Thenceforward, he indicates, and looking more particularly at German and French historians, histories became 'decisively nationalised accounts of the past', as 'science and patriotism were welded together in the reconstruction of the past' (p. 182). In the interest of constructing nation-states, historians became responsible for blending together hitherto multiple and plural identities into a single narrative. Effectively becoming midwives for these newly emerging entities, their task was to reconstruct the past 'in the shadow of a political identity in the course of construction' (p. 173).

That political function has remained central for historians up to the present – and that, despite fundamental changes during the last half-century in what is understood as 'history'. Those changes are what Sand is concerned with – not least in relation to himself – in a concluding chapter, strangely entitled 'Retreating from national time'. This chapter proved to be for me by far the most interesting, for it brings us to the author's encounter with later theorists, including postmodernists, and the effects they had on his own thinking as an historian.

So we have a critical discussion of the old favourites – and more particularly Hayden White, of course – but this is accompanied by some less commonplace contextualisation, by which I mean references to (sometimes comparatively overlooked) precursors, such as Paul Veyne and Carl Becker. Sand by no means accepts the postmodern position, or positions, *tout court*, but he does finally emerge as a sceptical relativist who accepts the impossibility of ever attaining any final 'truth' about the past. Nevertheless, he is (understandably in my view) unwilling to jettison the whole history project: historians may no longer be able to speak with the authority claimed in the 19th century, but 'history-myths' are nonetheless still likely to be needed. Under the new dispensation, these 'myths', in order to be acceptable, will have to be given with appropriate reservations about their own admitted limitations with respect to such concepts as 'truth' and 'certainty' and 'objectivity'. Historians will need to be 'more "humble" or less pretentious' (p. 260).

Shlomo Sand's treatment here of 'history-myths' leads him directly back once more to a consideration of his own present-day situation in Israel, and this is where he unashamedly re-enters the battle-zone. For he presents a scathing critique of the continuing acceptance by historians and others of the 'myth' of 'Eretz Israel', with its supposed historical justification for contemporary Israel and its inhuman and ongoing subjugation of the Palestinian population.

That conclusion is all the more persuasive for being couched – like the rest of his book – in a calm and measured style. Indeed, the book is for the most part eminently readable, almost entirely free of theoretical jargon; and the ultimate message is of clear importance for both politics and education. We are told that history's traditional function has been to teach students *what* to think, and Shlomo Sand proposes, I believe, that it should henceforth take on philosophy's erstwhile task of teaching them rather *how* to think; and the parameters within which that thinking is done need to be chronologically, geographically, and culturally

extended.

Sand's own work here might have been made more coherent, had some such argument been set up at the outset. As it stands, it seems to me lacking in any such argumentative structure, so that the intended direction is not always clear. There are, too, *longeurs* – where it is perhaps in order to accept the author's own invitation to skip. But the ultimate message is positive: if Clio 'seems today to be fading into the twilight' (as the book's title is belatedly clarified on page 262), she may, after the requisite modification of her clothing and character, still re-emerge to see another dawn. In that new dawn, she might at the least show that the past is not unitary or exclusively owned by any single interest group, but may lead more positively to a recognition of our shared humanity.

Notes

1. Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (London, 2009), *The Invention of the Land of Israel* (London, 2013), and *How I Stopped Being a Jew* (London, 2014). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Robert Rosenstone, *Adventures of a Postmodern Historian: Living and Writing the Past* (London, 2016). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Christian Meier, *From Athens to Auschwitz* (Cambridge, MA, 2005). [Back to \(3\)](#)

The author would like to respond as follows: I was glad to read this interesting review. Even if in some points I don't agree completely with the reviewer his comment was fair and instructive.

Other reviews:

Times Higher Education

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books-interview-shlomo-sand> [2]

Haaretz

<http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/books/.premium-1.685781> [3]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2101>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/272336> [2] <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books-interview-shlomo-sand> [3] <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/books/.premium-1.685781>