

The Use and Abuse of History, or, How the Past is Taught

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It is given to few to be accorded ‘classic’ status in their own lifetime, but Marc Ferro has qualified twice over – not only for the work under discussion here, but also for his account of *The Great War, 1914–1918* (1973). In its original French form, *The Use and Abuse of History (Comment on raconte l'histoire aux enfants à travers le monde entier)* itself was first published in 1981, with an English translation following in 1984; and in a short Preface to the new 2003 edition, the author explains that he has found it undesirable to modify the original text ‘by a single comma’. Somewhat confusingly, on the following page he goes on to say that he had found it necessary, for a French edition in 1992, to add some material – including three pages on post-perestroika Russia, a couple of short paragraphs on Poland after 1990, and a short comparative study of the history of the second world war. These modifications have been preserved, so what we have here, in fact, is a slightly (and not very recently) updated English edition.

The author himself confesses to the ‘truly vast and megalomaniacal’ nature of his aims (p. xiv) – which, as his subtitle indicates, embrace a worldwide survey of ‘how the past is taught to children’. He is concerned with particular examples of histories, that range chronologically from remote antiquity to the present, and geographically from Europe to Africa and Asia; so it is clear that he did indeed embark upon a voyage of infinite extent. But his seeds, if not sown deeply, have been scattered widely, and to good effect; and his work has, to varying degrees, successfully weathered the turbulent historiographical storms of the last two decades.

Following a brief preface, the reader is plunged into a series of what are effectively fifteen case studies, varying in length from seven to forty-seven pages, and designed to illustrate the author’s main (rather unexceptional, as it now might seem) contention, that school histories are frequently modified in the light of perceived political requirements. With citations from actual texts, he clearly demonstrates the ideological inputs that have been made into histories as diverse as those (for example) in South Africa, India, Poland, China, Japan and the USA. And his study of a multiplicity of local histories, shown to have derived variously from different sources and with different purposes, forces him to conclude that any ideal of a mirror-like representation of a unitary past has been shattered, and that ‘Universal history is dead’ (p. 356).

Above all, as Ferro emphasises, eurocentric history, if not already dead, is ripe for execution. And this is not only a simple matter of geography – of accepting that Europe is not the physical centre of the universe – but

also of recognising the need to jettison a whole associated web of ideological presuppositions. These are most obviously manifested in beliefs about racial superiority and technical progress, in terms of which non-Europeans may be regularly assigned to an inferior stage of cultural development: 'Studying the Bushmen', as we read in one South African text, 'helps us to discover how our ancestors lived when they were still in the Stone Age' (p. 14). But there are also implications for unthinkingly accepted periodisations, that may be improperly and inappropriately imposed on other cultures, whose own historical trajectories require their own narrative structures.

While eschewing eurocentrism, Ferro includes a particularly interesting chapter on 'History in European Eyes'. Entitled 'From Christ the King to the Nation-State', this section highlights the enormity of the author's self-imposed task, and is obviously and necessarily an exercise in ruthless selection. Thus, from 'Europe', Spain is allotted just over three pages, Germany nearly nine, and France fourteen; and within such parameters, little more can be done than indicate possible lines for further thought and research – some of which have since been profitably followed, and some of which remain matters of contemporary concern.

In particular, the case of Nazi Germany has become a well-worked field, with continuing discussion of a question raised by Ferro, as to why people have proved 'so afraid of analytical or critical history' (p. 150). The provocation of thoughts about the past, it is clear, can unearth memories that we might choose to be without; and this is a matter briefly introduced in relation to a postwar Germany where modern history was simply excised from the school curriculum, thus enabling a generation to deny all knowledge of who Adolf Hitler even was. Since Ferro made that observation in 1981, so much work has been done on the restoration of the memory of Nazism that few can remain unaware of Hitler's existence and the crimes perpetrated in his name; nor can many remain in doubt about the ideological input of historians if they have followed discussions, such as those of Mary Fulbrook, concerning the diverse interpretations of German history imposed on the same 'past' by 'eastern' ('totalitarian') and 'western' ('democratic') power blocs. In this sense, a seed planted by Marc Ferro has grown and flowered impressively; and more flesh has been added to his skeleton in, for example, Gilmer Blackburn's study of *Education in the Third Reich* (1985).

Importantly, too, in the context of Nazi Germany (as well as elsewhere), Ferro draws attention to the use of film in promoting an ideologically based version of history – a matter that has come to be of interest and increasing concern to commentators on the enormously popular films and television programmes that purport to represent 'history' on both sides of the Atlantic today. Hollywood films have surely rivalled those of Leni Reifenstahl as promoters of patriotic nationalism; and David Harlan's recent discussion (in the journal *Rethinking History*) of Ken Burns and his popular television presentations of American history (not without parallels in Britain) indicates that Ferro's reference to a 'prepackaged' and 'sterilised, unproblematical history' presented as 'a sort of exotic escape that serve[s] for evening relaxation of the tired citizenry' (pp. 157–8), may not have lost its relevance.

If films can all too often present an oversimplified narrative, there have been notable exceptions; and, in a recurring theme, Ferro observes that deviance from an 'official' version of events – questions in Russia, for example, about collectivisation, the gulags, the narrative of the second world war, Stalinist tyranny and its comparison with Nazism (all historical questions) – was registered first, not by historians at all, but by dissidents in the form of filmmakers (and novelists). He cites the case of Poland, where filmmakers succeeded in presenting a sort of 'anti-history', which, outside the historical mainstream, served to preserve an alternative version of the past, to what later seems good purpose. Thus, in his classic *Kanal*, the film director Wajda showed the Polish resisters hidden in the Warsaw sewers. They await the advancing Red Army to support them in their uprising against the Germans; but the audience is able to read the sudden silence, as the Russian artillery stops firing, as the abandonment that actually transpired. Russian officials, though, as Ferro notes, could hardly censor a silence – however full, as this one was, of historical meaning; so the film preserved some otherwise 'buried' history (an interpretation of past events that was not acceptable to the government).

Politically motivated censorship of history is most notoriously shown (or has been most clearly revealed) in

the case of the USSR. In his chapter entitled 'Aspects and Variations of Soviet History', the author reminds us of Khrushchev's overt warning in 1956, that 'Historians are dangerous, and capable of turning everything topsyturvey' (p. 163). They need, therefore, to be watched carefully by politicians mindful of the Orwellian Party slogan, that 'Who controls the past, controls the future'. Certainly, as visions for the Russian future changed, so their supporting histories were appropriately modified, with new dramas requiring new authors and a new cast of leading actors. Individuals were airbrushed out 'at the whim of those who succeed[ed] them' (p. 169), Trotsky replaced by Lenin, Lenin by Stalin; and while these substitutions may have been only temporary and provisional, at any one time only one single version of the past was tolerated.

Russia is, of course, far from unique in its ideological underpinning of school history, and in a chapter devoted to the USA Ferro notes some parallel vagaries in the presentation of a national past. Until the 1970s, American histories lay stress on the growth of such unifying and self-defining factors as equality, happiness, and liberty – characteristics that supposedly differentiated the story of their own new nation from the more problematic and ambivalent narratives associated with old Europe; and within an idealised 'melting-pot', there was no place for anomalous minorities. But more recently, 'melting-pots' have been replaced by 'salad-bowls' – a new model more hospitable to the notion of separate identities – wherein minorities have been enabled, and encouraged, to remain distinct. Americans may 'lead the field in ignorance of the outside world', with their belief that 'the rest of the world is not worth serious attention' (pp. 331–2); but with each minority group in turn asserting its own position of privilege, 'There are almost as many versions of the American past and present as there are schools and textbooks' (p. 327).

And that, Ferro concludes, is the essential mark of a democracy. While forced to concede that historians in democracies are inevitably subject to their own ideological pressures, we might claim that it is of the very essence of a democratic society that alternative histories are at least in principle possible. That is what differentiates the American position from the Russian: what matters is the possibility of *plurality*.

There are, then, a number of themes that run through Marc Ferro's case studies. First, and perhaps most obviously, is a thread of 'postcolonial' critique. This is an area that has grown enormously over the last two decades, and is one of which few can remain unaware. So it now seems unremarkable that the history taught to Algerians should be not only 'quite different from' the North African history taught in France, but 'its exact opposite, a counterpoint' (p. 106), or that there should be variant readings of Chinese history in Peking and Taiwan. Similarly, few now would be surprised to learn that the histories of British imperial rule in India, as taught respectively to English and Indian children, should show some variations, with the roles of heroes and villains often reversed, and 'mutinies' transmuted to 'struggles for liberation'. But it no doubt remains salutary to be reminded how alternative versions of history often serve to destroy 'the comfortable images of the West' (p. 109); and, although some of his examples may now seem somewhat obvious and even simplistic, Ferro's book may still be seen historically as something of a trendsetter.

Another, and related, theme has to do with what Ferro refers to as the 'therapeutic' and 'militant' functions of history. The former – with our understanding of personal and national needs to confront pasts that we should rather be without, and to make some current sense of them – has become, since Ferro wrote, and in relation especially to trauma, a study in its own right. This has grown with particular reference to the extreme case of Germany's Third Reich; but with Turkey's continuing reluctance to acknowledge the Armenian genocide in 1915, it can be seen to be still of immediate relevance.

For history's 'therapeutic' role can have implications verging on the 'militant'.

In other words, our own quest for meaning may effectively constitute aggression towards others. There is, and always has been, widespread belief in history's patriotic function; so Ferro's example of mid-twentieth-century calls in South Africa for 'a patriotic history of the nation', which 'must be taught in the light of revelation and must be seen as the accomplishment of God's will' (p. 5), are paralleled by Japanese requirements for history to demonstrate the divinity of their emperor, and the necessarily unchanging nature of the nation's social hierarchies. Such histories are 'militant' in their intention to justify the position of certain favoured individuals and groups and institutions at the (seemingly inevitable) expense of others.

That relates to a third theme: the divergence of 'public memory' from academic history. Memories are variously transmitted – not least through traditional public festivals: Spaniards annually celebrate their liberation from the Moors, Protestant English their salvation from the Papists. And through the historical plays of Shakespeare and the historical novels of Walter Scott, 'a retrospective vision of the British past is embedded in the popular memory' (p. 149). Those retrospective visions, though, surely lack the autonomy which Ferro attributes to them, being deliberately put to political and patriotic purpose as required. 'Public memories' are themselves ideological constructs – an officially sanctioned residue susceptible to politically motivated change. (Empire Day has disappeared; Holocaust Memorial Day has recently been established.)

A final theme of particular interest is that of Islam – a subject that has, of course, come to the forefront of attention since Ferro's brief but prescient treatment. 'No sooner is he forced to write about Islam, than the hand of the historian begins to tremble', we read on page 36; but a whole chapter is in fact devoted to 'The History of Islam', and may seem of increased relevance now, when it may still be true that, as Ferro asserts here, 'the ignorance of the problems of Islam... is, except among academics, as uncomprehending as total' (p. 332). This deficiency has been addressed of late by historians such as Richard Fletcher and Nabil Matar. But it may still be disconcerting, some twenty-five years on, to read in a document from the time of Nasser's Egypt (1950s), that 'The evacuation of your troops is the only basis for good relations between our two countries' (p. 99).

Those themes indicate and exemplify the continuing relevance of much of Ferro's subject matter, but how has his work weathered the historiographical storms of our recent past?

In this respect, it seems to me that it would have been helpful, in this new edition, to have been given some indication of how the book fits into our current intellectual climate, and of how the various particulars with which the author deals illustrate a whole (comparatively) new arena of debate. That, rather than the publisher's appeal to 'popular consent', would have given justification for the book's 'classic' status, as well as providing students with some theoretical introduction – some clearer sense of direction and of what the whole is actually about. It is the lack of that overall argumentative structure which particularly disappoints, together with the surprising absence of exact references to cited sources. That absence makes it more difficult to check the validity of authorial selection and interpretation – as, for example, in the case of Trinidadian slavery, where it is asserted (on what authority is unclear) that 'children, in a year or two, will no longer attach specific importance to it' [slavery], despite the preceding text concluding with the words: 'But our story is not finished, for there are still cases of this old and shameful practice in modern times' (p. 46). Admittedly, a geographically based bibliography provides some evidence for works consulted; but that is not enough for the frustrated source seeker. Further updating, too, would have been helpful, for example, in the case of Poland, where a mere half page is added on the 'new situation since 1990' (p. 267); or at the very least, for those students at whom the book is (presumably) primarily directed, some reference to further reading. Strangely, too, the (unannounced) new index omits previous entries which might have continued to prove useful: not least, 'fiction', 'films', 'Goebbels', and 'Saddam Hussein' – the last, in particular, a gift to conspiracy theorists, who can point to the recent 'democratically' inspired decision to excise all reference to Saddam Hussein from Iraqi school textbooks.

While, then, *The Use and Abuse of History* remains a useful text, it is inevitably in some respects a little

dated. To take the negative first, there are problems with the very title, inasmuch as it presupposes a position from which 'use' and 'abuse' can be clearly and unambiguously defined – something that actually runs counter to the book's whole argument. For what Ferro's various examples show, and as he himself concludes, is that there can be no one history that satisfies all tastes or needs – that can, even at a local level, possibly fulfil the aspirations of all the diverse members of our multicultural societies. In other words, there has to be selection – selection of the very 'facts', or building blocks of history, as well as selection of the narrative into which we choose to embed them; and, as Ferro himself recognised, even that choice of facts is 'itself an ideological act' (p. 156), with the choice of narrative surely being yet more obviously so. So, with the inevitability of ideological intrusion, our choice of what constitutes 'use' and what 'abuse' depends upon our own presuppositions – revealing no more than what we respectively approve and disapprove.

I there reveal my own position, which is in brief that all history is inevitably history-*for* – that one cannot have a history totally free of ideological input, telling it simply 'as it was'; which is a reason for welcoming variety and diversity of histories, better seen as complementary than competitive. And from this perspective, Ferro's own position seems ambivalent. For on the one hand, as we have seen, the whole thrust of his argument leads to recognition of history's (the past's) flexibility – its malleability at the hands of those who would (with various motivations) take control of it. 'History' (as our representation of the past), it seems, 'clearly stems from many different centres with their own ways of doing, forms, norms and demands' (p. 357); so 'The idea that there might be a single and universally acceptable vision of history has become increasingly illusory' (p. 361). Yet despite that disillusion, the old dream continues. In the face of numerous nationally based interpretations of the second world war (with Hiroshima ignored by Americans, Coventry by Germans, hostility to Resistance 'terrorists' by French), it's clear that 'the time is *not yet* ripe for a *definitive diagnosis* of the history of the second world war' (p. 344, my emphases); but that seems to imply that at some point in the future, some such 'definitive' diagnosis may yet come to fruition. Similarly, in the context of criticisms of Russian and Japanese texts, Ferro hopes that Russian historians may yet find their way back to 'a de-ideologised and autonomous practice' (p. 204); and he indicates that the Japanese, despite their previous aim to encourage patriotism rather than 'to reveal what actually happened' (p. 289), have more recently been 'gradually pushing on towards the objectivisation of historical knowledge' (p. 304) – implying again, surely, the validity of that long-since discredited goal of an 'objective knowledge' of 'what actually happened'.

More positively, Ferro suggests that we look to a future in which history 'tries to be comprehensive, and even total, but... is not totalitarian' (p. 360). That is indeed a challenge, for it seems to me a contradiction to aspire to a history that is both 'comprehensive' and 'total', without becoming 'totalitarian'. Better, I think, to conclude with our author's own concluding words: that 'progress in historical knowledge will come about not through the accumulation of knowledge of more events, but through the acquisition of a better methodology of comprehension' (p. 363) – which I take to be a plea for greater self-consciousness about not only what we do, but how and why we do it. As we endlessly debate our own school history curriculum, that is indeed classic advice to keep in mind.

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