

# **But Which History Is This?**

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*History is a progression toward the origin. Every new beginning in reality transforms all known time. But history is also one: plurality is now a moral slogan, like tolerance. The historians who recount it, who comment on it, who analyze it, obscure its visibility: history is the past! So no one will think of making use of it to transform the present.*

## Definition of History

History begins here and now. The spontaneous, the immediate, the present are the beginning of history. The past is an introduction that, like all introductions, is written about things that have been done, after they occur, in reflection, through mediation. The present begins history, and the past grants time to this beginning.

This is the movement that determines history: the past is a projection of the present, the past begins in its future, the present, and not the reverse; history is a progression toward the origin. This dialectic conception of history is not new, from the moment that Schiller and Hegel fluently explained it. But since then, materialist positivism has imposed another perspective of history and time: the beginning of history is found at the bottom and behind. The present is the highest and most advanced point; the future is the continuation like the rungs of a ladder, infinite and unchangeable. In this progression by degrees, the vectorial synthesis of the vision of time put forth by the Christian and Moslem religions is outlined: while for the Christians the past is behind and the future ahead, for the Moslems the progression of time is vertical, the past is below and the future above. Thus, the triumphal climb of economic positivism simultaneously satisfies both of these visions in the moments without history, just as it disappoints them in the moments in which human beings suddenly make history.

The beginning of history, the present, is thus always the same and always changeable. Each new beginning of history appears to correct all known time because, in reality, it transforms it. The night of times, the origin of time, is to be realized. In other words, the present remains in order to produce this beginning at its end. In this future where the present, the beginning of history, will contain the entire past, it will also contain the entire future. The end of history, like the end of time, is logical on the condition that history starts here and now. But history is not, as its beginning makes one suppose, a succession of beginnings each of which cancels the preceding one. On the contrary, given that each particular historical beginning, every new moment of history, opposes the preceding totality, it is also opposed by that totality, the generality of which history is the movement of determinations. At the same time in which renewal reveals such division, the new beginning is so utterly saturated with the past as to appear to be its outcome. When the renewal that reveals this brutal division in time transforms the entire past, the unity of the particular historical beginning with the preceding totality is not realized in their overcoming, as the determinations of the totality derived from its division. Here and now, this movement is never realized in this abstract and theoretical simplicity, since, in reality, here and now it is first of all the negation of an abstract movement that would be infinite. Everything in history is singular. History can even be considered, by those who understand how to grasp it at the moment in which it appears, as the singularity of singularity.

Therefore, the negation of eternity is the first negation that arises from the present as the beginning and end of history. Here and now, history is conflict, not happiness. The periods of happiness appear to us as blank pages, if by happiness one means religious happiness, positivist

happiness, economic happiness, harmony free of all discord. History is conflict. It is a conflict over its very objective and consequently, at intervals, over the means for attaining this objective. This is why here and now it becomes, above all, the negation of the presupposed principles of history. It would be possible here and now to put forth a definition of history. But the result would be the exact opposite of this conception, i.e., the negative revelation of what is said about it, of what is believed about it, of what is alienated by it. An affirmative definition would peacefully live together among the others, which are its negativity, its precision, its vigor. The historical situation today imposes unifying the affirmations of history in the negation of its separate affirmations.

## History Is One

This requirement has as an immediate consequence a primary affirmation that is so unusual in our time that it can only seem extremely ridiculous or excessively rigorous. It is precisely the affirmation of the unity of history against the multitude of opposed affirmations: there is only one history. Generally, this banality and its opposite are both supported, clearly even by the same people. In the face of rising confusion over concepts, it is now primitive to support with the most inflexible intransigence the affirmation of history as totality. History is one. Are there perhaps different humanities?

Concretely this means that there is already falsification in speaking of the history of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the history of Paris, the history of the human body, the history of my neighborhood, the history of a table or the history of freedom. To recount a history<sup>1</sup> is an abuse of language, an impoverished deviation, a secondary meaning of which [to tell a tale — translator] acknowledges this undertaking: it means to tell a lie. Of course, between a story and history, it is more a matter of sounding alike than of meaning the same thing. And if everyone were aware of this and distinguished without hesitating between a separate story and history, that suppresses the separation and contains all the separate stories as separate, I would not have to digress any further. But professional historians, who could possibly be described as the enemies of history, not content with approving each separate story, unite to ideologize the separations in history in accordance with their specializations. They describe this justification of their abdication as the plurality of history. Plurality is a short cut for speaking of democracy with the servants of that democracy called western. Plurality has become a slogan, a moral slogan, like tolerance, that contains an anathema: whoever objects to this or that plurality is a totalitarian, a supporter of tyranny, the enemy of all democracy. These scurrilous intellectuals are so rarely contradicted, whether from contempt, apathy or ignorance, that their anti-historical conceptions have now crept into nearly everything. But what most sustains the miserable commerce of these liquidators of dismantled fragments is that from each separate story — those for lulling babies to sleep at night, those for instructing adolescents, those for misleading their parents and those for provoking the old — present-day history oozes, both in the form of traces of an ephemeral passage and in the organization of its absence. In fact, the most paradoxical determination of history is that the absence of history is history. Thus everything is history. But the enemies of history are consequently those who nourish the amalgamation between the whole proud conception and its opposite, whatever that may be. For them, anything is history. At this point, there is no longer any difference between history and the absence of history. In reality, the absence of history is a simple determination

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<sup>1</sup>This is a play on words in Italian. "Storia" can mean both "history" and "story" or "tale".

of history, like their unity, which constitutes their truth. But the determinations of the absence of history are not determinations of history. Now these determinations of the absence of history raised in separation and indifference to the condition of determinations of history, not only by the valets of the associations of self-styled historians, but by valets of all the other associations authorized by their example, end up hiding the singularity of history in this renunciation, this prostitution.

The best example of a practical conflict between human beings that is indirectly historical is the war of 1939–1945. This war, called a world war, is only a consequence of the historical dispute of 1917–1921, the distant repression of the side defeated in that dispute, which had so much more significance from a distance. But it was really in 1917–1921<sup>2</sup> that a dispute over humanity took place, not in 1939–1945, which was only the working out of the consequences of this earlier dispute, a disagreement within the side that had won. Since then, this side has tried to substitute its internal disputes for the disputes that exist in the world, their particular history for the general history of humanity. A falsification that is at its worst in the example of 1939–1945 is the mix-up which occurs in assuming that the event that makes the greater impression is the most important. After the war of 1939–1945, which continues to be the most important event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for the vast majority of those who stand to benefit from it, this generalized technique has been one of the most powerful separators of history in the understanding of the side defeated in 1921 and drained of blood in 1945. History as totality is generally perceived as a myth. Contemporary pettiness has practically abdicated before the greatness of the object in a way that, just as it confuses its beginning and its origin, unfortunately reduces history to a unity of separate stories making it start with a capital “H”. What’s more, it is an authentic alienation of logic to flatten this “universal” history into particular histories: today it is solely from the particular that the general is abstracted and not, in fact, from the general that one determines the particular. It is from the event that history is deduced and its “H” measured, and not from history that one deduces the requirements and imperatives that cause an event to reveal itself or not. Real history is a totality the wealth and meaning of which does not stand on the number of determinations, but in their relationship with the whole, and that for brevity and the peculiarity of their manifestations nearly always excludes almost all individuals and other things from itself. It has a beginning and an end and a content in movement: history exists and does not exist in freedom, in a table, in my neighborhood. History exists and does not exist in the human body, in Paris or in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Nonetheless, the beginning of history understood as totality, that may or may not be in each moment, is primarily each renewal, undetermined, of humanity. But the renewal is the thing that is opposed to the existing totality, that revolutionizes it. Now recently, deduction is needed in order to determine the totality. This is how, from the recently conceived totality, one deduces the renewal as the determination of history, but in the course of the operation this renewal ceases to be such. But there is nothing more misleading than a renewal that suddenly disappears! Nothing is more common than ignorance, that in this way often prevents one from discovering what is new by consenting to consider as new that which is not. Finally, nothing is more limited in

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<sup>2</sup>During this period, there was not only a revolution going on in Russia, but also an uprising in Germany that took on revolutionary dimensions and a significant, potentially revolutionary insurrection in Italy. The social democratic German state suppressed the uprising using right-wing proto-nazi bully boys. In Italy the bourgeoisie turned increasingly to the fascists to restore order. And of course, in Russia the Bolsheviks took power. Thus, indeed, this conflict over humanity was the source of the war of 1939–1945.

general than the individual awareness, which almost always refuses to conceive of the changed totality even when that upon which it is based is proven to be overturned! So much more if the individual awareness does not interpret historical movement as renewal, the historical movement is what interprets individuals as old junk without awareness. Since every historical moment is now a debate between renewal and totality in which those who remain silent and those who are late are exposed to every sort of contempt, to every sort of severity.

## History Is an Activity

Since history is the debate over the new, the first renewal that history reveals is the renewal of the debate. In the times of Herodotus and Tacitus, the inquiry into events seemed to be the necessary basis of this debate. Those who carried out such inquiries, and for that reason are described as historians, and those who apprehended its development were the ones who conducted this universal debate. Their writings formed the memory of past events and the laws of future events and were respected as the very debate that precedes or concludes action. Unfortunately, whether aware of the past inquiries or not, humanity has never taken them into account since action surpasses word in the decisive moment of a dispute. In general, this contempt is upset by the passions that the rather furious dispute rouses among human beings. The contradiction between lived emotions and defined and judged emotions excluded the ancient historians from the debate whose reflection they reproduced. Because now the word is no longer the predicate of the debate. Because now spirit rules over consciousness and not consciousness over spirit. Because now it is blatantly false to state that history begins with writing.

In his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel concedes a bizarre compromise: history would be made both by those who narrate it and by those who do it. History being the movement of the spirit, those who consciously transmit its determinations, historians, would contribute as much to history as the conquerors and founders who in a certain way furnish its substance. What is remarkable is not so much the embarrassment of having to justify the determining role of those who narrate history, but the observation, now so far from the ancients, that history, the spiritual debate of humanity, could be conducted even by those who do not compile it. The world of Hegel is now a world of dispute, where the word, even the one which Hegel uses, is recognized as a mere tool for the debate.

Today, the primary innovation of the debate, the consequences of which are nevertheless incalculable, confirms the movement that was indicated in Hegel's time: the debate is practical and only practical. People no longer discuss effectively in words. The ancestral custom of sanctioning a dispute with a speech, declaring a war or establishing a peace treaty has vanished. Some use words as very specific weapons to paralyze and disorient; others, the majority, unable to use words without getting bogged down in them or stumbling over them, become extraneous. Even among outlaws and the illiterate, respect for the word is less. Thus, a new expression, new expressions, they already express themselves. Of course, here the innovation is not that history is practice and only practice and that the act of recounting it, commenting on it, analyzing it is not history — but rather a practice of collection, subordinated to other things as the general staff is subordinated to the five-star general — but that already in the times of Hegel, of Tacitus, of Herodotus it constituted the same thing. Making history is the best way of recounting it.

As opposed to what the practice of history reveals, the ravings of the historians of today: for them, only historians make history. History has become a subject. And that subject is scholastic. History is a social science, which means a certain number of salaried specialists who cut out bits from the past for a certain number of students. In the current conflict of humanity, those who are described as historians don't even have the function of a general staff in the service of one of the two sides, but rather that of a weapon more or less comparable to that of the octopus: squirting ink in order to interfere with visibility. Here are a few of the opinions of one of the most admired of this faction of insects, Fernand Braudel: "For me, history is the sum of all possible history — a collection of techniques and points of view, of yesterdays, today's and tomorrow's." Everything that anyone defines as history can be added to history; history is a work of specialists, not the activity of all humanity; any collection of viewpoints is placed on its shoulders; one is even invited to give credit to the future, a thing certainly no more risky than giving credit to Braudel: "We are against the proud one-sided words of Treitschke: 'People make history'. No, on the contrary, History makes people and forges their destiny." In order to respond to the first half of this rhetorical inversion for students, if it is not people who make history, who does so? And in order to respond to the second, it only displeases me that, if it is true that history makes people, in passing it has unfortunately missed Braudel. Finally, between 1930 and 1950, what has changed in the intellectual Bordello to which history has been reduced in this case? "... The exceptional work of Ernest Labrousse, the newest contribution of the last twenty years." Damned stupid things like the Barcelona Commune and the two-fold insurrection of Varsavia, only to cite these in an ill-favored period like Labrousse. It is not surprising that those who make history, who practice it, as the general activity of human beings, don't have care in the least to reappropriate the title, which has become so repugnant, of historian! Thus, the enemies of history, who claim to congeal it in a scientific specialty, fulfill their function, of which they are no longer aware, in the current debate: separating history as activity, and also as whatever is possible, from the consciousness of its protagonists, even potential ones.

## History Is a Current Activity

After having spread the initial opinion that history is not an activity and is not within reach of everyone, the professional historian puts forth another opinion about it: history is the past. Even though this idea is not particularly deep-rooted because it is vague and general, it is nonetheless most wide-spread among the poor and contributes to strongly drowning them in resignation. In fact, the historian, with his dusty erudition or his fragmented knowledge, her wanton fixations that stupefy without attracting and recount without understanding, and his recent exhibitionism that exalts his disgusting old age, inserts herself between the poor and history as a temporal decay: he himself symbolizes the past.

It is important to talk a bit more here about the historian than she deserves, because, willingly or not, he has become the intellectual authority that guarantees the loss of historical awareness. Today the historian is removed from contemporary history proportionally to his separation from the terrain of the current debate. In fact, it is understood that some historians deal with "current topics", but then it is as if they were among subjects belonging to a past that they have cooled down. This is how they contribute to cooling down the present. These sterile associations with the present act, in accordance with a common place, as the rather rare exceptions that prove the

rule: history is the past.

Working on the past, historians never try to use it to transform the present. Rather history, being exclusively the past, confirms the present. Since the primary outcome of history being exclusively the past is that it is not present, it is excluded from the present. After having informed us through their activity that history is not an activity, historians inform us through their backwardness that history is backwardness. This outcome is reinforced by an unexpressed fact: clearly every poor person, including every historian, are quite aware that there is history today, quite apart from the profession; but that is theory! In her practice, the poor person, including the historian, daily verifies the opposite and affirms it: there is no longer history. Without being able to express it, this poor person has the vague feeling of being before and beyond history at the same time, in the infinite. Having given up changing the world, they believe that the world does not change and never will change.

Thus it is quite difficult for them to identify with past protagonists of history. Depending on their parish, historians impose one or another of the models that has the effect of excusing the poor in the project-less gloom of submission. Some show them famous personages in their banality and misery so that our spectators convince themselves that the protagonists of history are poor like them, a thing that flatters them. Others show these personages as so rich as to have nothing to do. Still others proclaim that from the most distant past, abstract concepts have been making the world go round. Whatever people do, it is useless to devote oneself to doing it; or maybe perhaps the poor were already making history in their daily life and work, in their “sexuality” and their “culture” without knowing it. Therefore, it is useless to change. In each case, there is nothing stirring, nothing great, nothing beautiful; nothing to grasp, not even in hand. The past is nothing but an imperfect time in relation to the present. Consequently, it is better to exist today than in history. In the past, dealt with as it is, the modern poor, dealt with as they are, only find having an interest in separating today from history.

In 1984, Orwell vehemently criticizes the permanent rewriting of the past. This stalinist practice is opposed with faith in the current dominant ideology, the principle of an objective history, a past for which it would be possible to some extent to fix the terms in a definitive manner. However, the past is not merely recalled, but rather discovered and consequently modified in light of the present. The conflict over humanity continually changes reasons, speech, battlefields, weapons, protagonists and perspectives, or rather methods and tools for observing as well as expressing the past, all necessarily subjective. What distinguishes this rewriting of the past from the sort criticized in 1984 is that the latter is police work. It destroys and excludes what came before it, which Orwell denounces precisely as the excess of falsehood, as an annihilation of history; whereas the rewriting of past history necessary to the side that makes history, is the constant confrontation of all the contradictions of its operations, of the past with the present, of awareness with ignorance, of the present day with its overcoming. Whether it is a reaction to the transformation of history in the past, or the will to bring back paradise on earth, after Marx the most radical theory maintains the idea that we are still in prehistory. History would be the future, only the future. Let's put an end to prehistory here and now. Prehistory is an invention of historians for demonstrating the qualitative difference from a time when there were no historians, altered by Marx to demonstrate the difference between realized communist society and our own. In both cases, prehistory is the period before the controversy of humanity over humanity. Since our time reveals that writing is not the indispensable condition of this controversy, there is nothing to show that there ever was a period without controversy over humanity; whereas



everything leaves us to suppose that the moment of the rule of this debate will be its final silence. Which is why the imperfect and unclear controversy that is taking place here and now is really the whole of history. Transposing it into the future propagates the same conception as confining it to the past: faith in an eternal time. In the first case, there is no longer history, the present is eternal; in the second case, there is not yet history, the future is eternal and that is where humanity is realized. For my part, I am no believer. History has an end, as does humanity, and there will never be an eternity.

## History Is a Game

History is the shortest moment one can imagine, right now. And history is all the measurable time of humanity. This impressive expanse, which seems infinitely great, only exists in this moment that seems infinitely small. From these two contradictory dimensions, history draws its seriousness and the inexhaustible richness of the world, an outburst of laughter in the midst of a succession of miseries.

The end of history, the realization of humanity, is the aim of history. The realization of individual life is not different from the realization of history, which is why no individual life is yet realized. Only the need for this simultaneous realization of the individual and of the species contains the definitive satisfaction called happiness. But happiness is at most an unverified idea, an undetermined aim. Yet it is this aim to make all greatness identical to life that attracts human beings like a lover who, for the moment, is outside their life. Their end is the only authentic need that makes them live. It is a matter of a need that is precisely the opposite of need. In every way, the realization of history is at the same time the necessity of the individual and of humanity. It is the need that contains and establishes all others. Glory is the imprint with which history marks anyone who appropriates it for himself. In our time, the lack of esteem for glory, the very little glory, measure the immensity of the resignation of humanity toward realizing itself.

Those who have ambitions of glory, who can and will make history, know that history is a game. For the others, who are their pawns, history is a succession of catastrophes: history is the controversy for which they are the gags, the dispute for which they are the plugs, the war for which they are the corpses, the embrace for which they are the prohibition. The players that recognize this extreme game that goes beyond their life know that they must actually go beyond themselves; and this may not be enough. Far from discouraging them, this immeasurable necessity attracts them. I will not enumerate the qualities that are necessary in order to win, because everything is useful. I only want to show that the aim is the victory, that history is short!

The enemies of history affirm: that history is long; and also: that history is determined. Thus, this absolute game is the game for the *(pre)dominance* of the totality, which belongs to all humanity, but also the conflict of divided humanity. In fact, what makes this game absolute is that it has no rules other than those established by the participants and so always completely ephemeral. The sacred is a rule of the profane game; the infinite is the labyrinth of illusion in history. The absolute is itself only a rule implied in establishing explicit rules.

Finally, history is to life what the daily reality is to survival, the measure of its time. The game is the general activity of the human being, where intelligence is the unity of heart and mind. In his need to practice the game, history, the human being encounters necessity as misery, as accident,

as the alienation of his intelligence. Our epoch completes the world showing work opposed to the game, necessity opposed to life, daily reality opposed to richness. Richness is never necessary. Humanity can survive without history. The perplexities of the heart and spirit can go until the oblivion of the heart and spirit, until resignation. Love and genius, unexamined, are diminished in the proliferation of their surrogates of the same name. In the game, there are no lessons to draw out any more than there are respectable laws. Practical richness, history, has only one exigency, limit and principle, the will of human beings — that constitutes their pleasure for the game — to be through with it.

## **Definitively**

History is the game of the entire and divided humanity, here and now. It has as its aim the predominance and end of humanity and time.

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