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On the historian’s answerability to the future*

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“History is a study of past and present societies,” this is how Fernand Braudel summed up his lecture delivered as he was receiving his honorary doctorate from the University of Warsaw on 23 April 1967. The title of the lecture was *L’histoire “opérationnelle”*.¹ Incidentally, his message is still relevant and he could deliver the lecture once again today. I have decided to turn his words into my motto, because they once inspired me to add “and future societies”.

This led me to the conclusion of my post-doctoral dissertation:

History as a science begins for me when we decide to reject the burden of all the existing knowledge of the past... History deprives us of illusions, it presents society with a mirror, which is incapable of lying. However, can history help in any way, when the image presented is not accepted? Few people want to know the truth about the present; what we seek above all is a confirmation of our beliefs. Yet I see a chance for history in that everyone is curious to know what the future will bring. Historians who are not afraid to explore the past, reconstruct it and explain the meaning of the present must consequently pave the way for what will come. Futurology is a consequence of pursuing history, it is its quintessence.²

“Kieniewicz’s thesis sounds bold, almost provocative,” wrote Tadeusz Łepkowski at the time (1976) in *Tygodnik Kulturalny*,³ but that was it. My provocation was understood and brought to light only by Ewa Domańska.⁴ But today I have to admit

* Text of a lecture delivered on 5 December 2018 during a doctorate renewal ceremony at the University of Warsaw. Several fragments have been omitted then, and a few minor corrections and essential references have been introduced.

¹ BRAUDEL 1971, pp. 334–335.

² KIENIEWICZ 1975, p. 173.

³ ŁEPKOWSKI 1980, p. 152.

⁴ DOMAŃSKA 2013, p. 222; DOMAŃSKA 2015, pp. 14–15.

that I had no idea about what would happen to my discipline over the following decade. And that the history I was thinking about at the time would be questioned before Fukuyama announced the end of history...⁵

Who do historians believe themselves to be, when they ask about their answerability? I am considering this question like the deputies gathered in the Salle du Jeu de Paume facing Abbé Sieyès' provocation:⁶ what is history? Everything. What is it in the current political order? Nothing. What does it desire to be? Unlike in the situation in 1789, the answer is not "to become something". In the current state of the world history should demand attention for itself, it should demand that it be heard. Provided, of course, that we are able to implement Braudel's proposal and make it operational.

Given the multitude of understandings of history, I opt for the one defining it as a discipline studying the past. The sense of this study consists in, among others, establishing past events and transforming them into a narrative. It makes historical time present. However, I cannot deny that there is also History with the capital H.

Historians have always liked to see themselves as priests of this History or at least as custodians of the past. They discovered, kept, told and interpreted the past. Yet this is not necessarily the essence of their vocation, given that the doctoral pledge features such meaningful words: "non sordidi lucri causa / nec ad vanam captandam gloriam, / sed quo magis veritas propagetur / et lux eius, / qua salus humani generis continetur, / clarius effulgeat". We are to expand the scope of truth shedding light on humankind. The great and the good go down in history thanks to us, (not always) acknowledging their answerability to history as once equal to God. We do not go down in history, but sometimes regard ourselves as equally important, especially since it was established that God did not exist. Stung by the disrespect shown to us, we lock ourselves in trenches or towers. Cyprian Norwid was well aware of the problem. I have quoted his poem several times:

A lot, when one measured an old cemetery,
Or a genealogical oak — A lot, when
one took an inventory, looked deep into eras
And made the description manifest...

But if in an old man, a husband, a woman
The fear of their grandfather returned,
The fear as he looked at the first comet,
When he stood for the first time over the globe:
..... here is — a writer of history!⁷

⁵ STOBIECKI 2005, p. 13.

⁶ SIEYÉS 2002, p. 5: "Nous avons trois questions à nous faire. 1° Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État? Tout. 2° Qu'a-t-il été jusqu'à présent dans l'ordre politique? Rien. 3° Que demande-t-il? À y devenir quelque chose."

⁷ C.K. Norwid, *Historyk*. I quoted the poem in 1999, in: *Historyk wobec losu człowieka* and in 2015, in: *Odpowiedź na wyzwania przyszłości*.

But at some point I realised that I, too, was motivated by not so noble a desire to be regarded as a Writer of History...⁸

It seems to me that I touched upon an important issue at the time, but I needed many years (and several books) to turn this intuition into a project. The project is a minimalist one and the role of historians in it is that of suppliers. On the one hand they should provide us with the highest quality information about past events and processes. Knowing full well that reconstructing past events is unrealistic, they do, however, have a chance to draw conclusions from traces that have been left behind. We should not neglect what geologists, palaeontologists or forensic scientists have at their disposal. On the other hand historians' duty is to supply models for projecting the future.⁹ Obviously, I leave out the role most frequently attributed to historians, namely that of those who describe, who "make the description manifest", that is, our favourite job of creating stories.

The writer of history is for me a figure of a responsible historian who wants to move minds and highlight the message. I grappled with this for years, with varying success, until I finally concluded that any attempt to define what history meant for me required me to tackle the question of my own answerability. Answerability for the truth. I came to the conclusion that in this regard I was answerable to the future. To what is not there yet when I am working.¹⁰

The matter is by no means obvious. The only certainty is the fact that historians will be brought to justice by the future. Not because the passage of time will revise their findings, opinions and concepts. This is how my father saw this, writing in 1980, "I am under no illusion that my numerous scholarly writings will soon be forgotten. What will survive — if the world manages to avert a catastrophe — will be editions of sources".¹¹ Henryk Wereszycki agreed with him on a similar occasion, saying that "this publication has earned you a unique place in the history of historiography, for even the finest books get old... On the other hand, this collection of sources, which is undoubtedly your personal achievement, will last: *aere perennius*... No one has achieved this in our generation of historians".¹² Therefore, it is quite understandable that I would like the future to look favourably upon me...

Perhaps it is an illusion to expect this justice. Who cares about historiography today? This is not about justice in the sense of "the deeds being written down...". I am accompanied by a sense of duty and, at the same time, the prospect of having to account for one's actions. This future is very unpleasantly concrete. Thus, let me

⁸ This is a position I assigned to Tadeusz Łepkowski, *Historia: sposób bycia*, "Literatura", 37, 10 September 1980; KIENIEWICZ 2015a, p. 99.

⁹ However, this is not because "history obeys laws that allow us to make predictions and channel its course"; ATTALI 2008, p. 9.

¹⁰ KIENIEWICZ 2015a.

¹¹ KIENIEWICZ 1980, p. 265.

¹² H. Wereszycki to Stefan Kieniewicz [12 November 1987] in: *Korespondencja* 2013, p. 743.

begin with the duty which the historians take on voluntarily and for which they are accountable to neither the institutions nor the authorities. One of the elements of this duty is interdisciplinarity.¹³

My generation was taught that historians boldly entered other scholarly disciplines, convinced that everything was a source. However, we were not willing to reflect on our own vocation — perhaps with the exception of Marcin Kula.¹⁴ But we did read about it and here I should recall the lessons of Jacques Le Goff.¹⁵ Thus the first thing seems to be mastering the method and posing the research questions in such a way so as to be able to speak seriously of looking for the truth.

Let me quote a *post factum* reflection of a fellow historian coming to terms with his own past. Ryszard Stemplowski writes,

Historians fulfil their function especially when, in suggesting a problem worth exploring, they ask questions of major social significance, formulate a hypothesis or thesis and use an appropriate set of analytical categories, seek to take into account all available sources — including those that contradict their hypothesis/thesis — do not shy away from questions about what does not harmonise with it, present arguments for it and include arguments to the contrary, know how to analyse sources (source criticism), are aware of the trap of presentism, do not exaggerate moral dilemmas but neither do they refrain from adopting a clear final position. This is what is commonly described as an objective approach. It does not have to produce some grand thesis. The general knowledge, source material and analytical skills are sometimes sufficient only for formulating a hypothesis.¹⁶

All this is true, but how does it relate to answerability? To whom?

When trying to define myself in academia, I formulated the concept of eco-historian.¹⁷ In this way I wanted to show the equal significance of economics and ecology in my formation. But combining competences is not a solution. For where does the problem lie? Is it in the feeling of having lost the sense of uniqueness of our discipline? After all, history is my profession, learned and practised. When on 1 October 1955 I arrived at the University, I knew that in this temple of scholarship the Institute of History was a unique place. When I received my master's and doctor's diplomas, I become even more convinced that I was among the chosen few. My friends from exact, biological or medical sciences did not deprive me of this certainty. I learned a lot from them, but I did not cease to doubt that *historia est magistra omnis scientiae*. I was not a faithful pupil; from the very beginning I was seduced by other paths,

¹³ KIENIEWICZ 2014a.

¹⁴ KULA 2008.

¹⁵ Primarily *History and Memory*, Polish edition 2007, a collection of writings from the 1970s. I owe a similar debt to Krzysztof Pomian, beginning with his *Przeszość jako przedmiot wiary* (1967) and ending with *Historia. Nauka wobec pamięci* (2006).

¹⁶ STEMPLOWSKI 2018, pp. 15–16.

¹⁷ KIENIEWICZ 2014b.

above all by the exotic world, referred to at the time also as the Third World. No, I certainly did not lose my pride and self-assurance. Rather, it was the sum of my life experiences that made me look with sadness at the mistreatment of my muse over the following thirty years. With time I got to know these new strands, tendencies and orientations, deconstructions and turns. I was not seduced by them, perhaps because when I was writing my *Kerala*, I set myself completely new goals. But when 30 years after receiving my doctorate I came to what is today the “Artes Liberales” faculty, the world of my University looked completely different.

But let us not waste time on reminiscences. I do not mean here that historians should be ready to adopt the attitude of public intellectuals. I was instilled with a belief in the service historians take on in society not because of a sense of civic duty, but because of the specificity of their profession.

Let me now quote one of our Fathers, Joachim Lelewel. Ending his postscript to *Historyczna paralela Hiszpanii z Polską* around 1836, he concluded:

Please, forgive me for having turned my gaze to the future. When one is at the end of the past, one enters the future, which happens instantly. The present does not exist for us; it is only a junction between the past and the future, a non-existent, non-perceivable, non-definable moment that constantly eludes the human thought.¹⁸

Who can call themselves today a creator of the future?

Projecting the future was consolidated among humanists as a creative task after the First World War together with the belief in the key role of national communities. This optimism stemmed from the conviction that there existed laws of development that could be uncovered by science. It turned out, however, that laws of history were no match for will and that projects created in line with this will and objective laws did not work. Or, rather, they worked as a nightmare. It could be said that although communities, especially national communities, do emerge and endure, their future remains unpredictable, even unfeasible. Communities are increasingly replaced by masses. Moreover, they display a consumer taste in matters of identity. Realising that the past, which I was to explore *wie es eigentlich gewesen sein*, which I was to understand, applying the laws of social development, was only and as much as another narrative, a series of ideas put together in accordance with the changing needs of consumers, I understood that this excluded me from creating projects of the future.

I have to introduce an important qualification here. This “joint project for the future”, as Ortega y Gasset put it, should not be identified with plans of the future, beloved by leaders and bandied about by intellectuals. They have always set goals for us, seeking to ensure eternity for themselves. What is worse, this desire for glory has infected politicians, who as a rule think about how they will be portrayed in history textbooks. A project of the future uniting people into a community of effort and responsibility is always anonymous, only sometimes assuming the allegorical

¹⁸ LELEWEL 2006, p. 68.

form of Liberty Leading the People onto the Barricades. Perhaps nations only occasionally have such a sense of being united in a collective belief. We are afraid of such moments, we long for them, but we can say little about the formation of such an outburst. Moreover, we should be under no illusion: “no party has a positive image of the future,” as the Tofflers reminded us a quarter of a century ago, referring to the United States.¹⁹ Today this can be repeated with regard to the whole world. We are swamped with scenarios for the next fifty or even one hundred years; the stories of the future are becoming increasingly fantastic and scary. Like any utopia, be it *retro* or *progre*.²⁰ If we agree that 1968 was the beginning of the era of “planetary concern”, we have lived through a half a century that has not changed the face of this earth in the sense in which the phrase was used by John Paul II in Plac Zwycięstwa (Victory Square) in Warsaw in 1979. In any other sense we are living in a completely different world and, in addition, we realise that what was a concern half a century ago is an obvious threat today. And the changes which have happened in that period have not been diagnosed in a way that would make it possible to demonstrate how they happened.

What a challenge to a Writer of History! A painful challenge, as, pronouncing my idea so boldly, I did not predict anything. This idea of mine was not made concrete (fortunately!), but it did prove very useful in analyses of a rather distant past with regard to changes taking place under the impact of expansion and environment. I believe that I acted in line with Braudel’s suggestion, but in a completely individual manner.

So what would it mean, today or tomorrow, that historians should devote themselves to futurology? It is not about predicting the future. What I meant at that time was that a reconstruction of the functioning of society in the past made it possible to understand the prospects for its further development. “L’histoire n’est pas seulement un récit, même de grands événements, elle est une explication,” is another reference to Braudel.²¹ I went on to develop an entire concept the sense of which came down to the key significance of the change process. How does change happen? And, above all, what responsibility can historians bear for the course of change?

Historians pay a lot of attention to change. In fact, approaching all phenomena from the perspective of time, they record changes, interpret them and try to understand how they happened. This means that when reconstructing an event, they want to highlight the change and explain its course. It seems to me, however, that in understanding the process they rely strongly on psychologists and sociologists, perhaps even on economists. That is why answers to questions about change are suggested today by Inglehart, Castells, Rifkin, Giddens, Wallerstein or Bauman. Models of social change presented to us are marked primarily by the following of the effects

¹⁹ TOFFLER, TOFFLER 1996, p. 92. The authors quote Lee Atwater’s statement from 1989.

²⁰ BAUMAN 2018.

²¹ *Les écrits* 1997, p. 37. Cf. VÉZIER 2012.

of the rapid collapse of the hitherto dominant principles of social order and institutional structures. The variety of factors contributing to the collapse and the already ongoing process are supposed to thoroughly change the situation of the individual and the individual's relations with the social world.

This is how I view the problem. The biography of humankind is a series of changes in human beings' cultural code.²² They unfold in constant homeostasis²³ and steady relationship between human beings and the environment.²⁴ This is how culture is formed, and societies and civilisations emerge. Historians study elements of the past and take part in the creation of identity stories. They recognise cultural heritage and know how narratives emerge. I think that this entitles them to pronounce judgements on the possibility of influencing behavioural patterns, which are the basis of any transformation. This is particularly relevant, when, in defending homeostasis, the social system opts for a search for a new identity.²⁵ Historians can spot the moment of a turn from the defence of the old to the building of a new identity, because they have seen traces of such events in the past. They should also be able to point to elements of heritage that can be used in the identity turn.²⁶ This is precisely what I mean by a project for the future. Today the problem is extremely difficult, because crisis affects national and supranational communities, and globalisation clearly makes it less likely for people to create some kind of planetary community.

And here is an attempt at a conclusion. The feedback between the present and the past leads to the emergence in culture of a code that ensures culture's continued existence. At the same time it can potentially create a New Transformation, that is a model/project of the continued existence of the system in the future, of its new identity. Thus emerges History, evidence of evolution. By exploring, reconstructing, interpreting and telling history, we provide cultural evolution with important material to create new models of conduct. This means that history contains a resource making a Metamorphosis — independent change of the identity of the system — possible. Historians' answerability stems from their ethos as scholars; it is a consequence of the possibility of supporting society in its existence and the opening up of a chance for a Metamorphosis.

If we do not establish how change happens, we will not respond to the challenge.

The challenge is the awareness of the need to find solutions to global threats and, at the same time, the need to define one's place in the world of global consumption as well as lasting coordinates in the all-encompassing network. Having lost in our striving for a utopia of progress, we turn out to be unnecessary in attempted retro

²² MARINA, RAMBAUD 2018.

²³ DAMASIO 2018, pp. 192–193.

²⁴ SCRUTON 2017.

²⁵ For me, identity is the ability of a system to exist, KIENIEWICZ 2003, pp. 43–45; cf. APPIAH 2018, p. 102.

²⁶ I write more extensively about this in KIENIEWICZ 2019.

utopias. Tribes do not need history; they live on myths. The global village has turned out to be a supermarket, in which history does not end up in the basket.

Given the challenges of our time: nuclear, ecological and technological, historians' answerability consists in providing material for projecting change, in taking part in its transformation into repeatable scenarios, in daring to suggest ways of implementing them. We are to take part in processes ranging from guaranteeing data privacy to empowering communities again. This may mean standing up to algorithms; in any case we should certainly join the fight for recognising the right to the existence of the human body.²⁷ Perhaps this will not be enough.

There has been no answer to the question of what history — this profession of ours without capitalisation — demands. Henryk Samsonowicz likes to repeat after St. Augustine that "Memoria est vis magna".²⁸ I will say that "Historia est vis magna" and as such it should demand to be recognised as a force. First, however, we must believe in it.

Perhaps only in restoring the tremor of fear to people do we touch upon the essence. A description of changes, their interpretation and assessment send no chills down anybody's spine. Emotions appear when we participate, not necessarily when we understand. Operational eco-history provides for the participation of historians. Participation gives rise to answerability. In any case, it is obvious to me that it stems from the fidelity to the pledge once made.

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²⁷ HARARI 2018, pp. 111, 127.

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