

This is an extract from a lecture given by Eric Hobsbawm at the beginning of the academic year at the Central European University, an institution recently set up in Budapest in Hungary. The first part of his lecture deals with the problems of transition from a socialist to a market economy. The second part concerns itself with the problem of relating to past history and to the identities based on the various readings to which it is amenable. We feel that much of what he says can be relevant to our own situation.

THE NEW THREAT TO HISTORY

Eric Hobsbawm

This brings me to my second and main point, which is much more directly relevant to the work of a university. Or at least to that part of the work which concerns me as historian and a university teacher. For history is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addition. The past is an essential element, perhaps the essential element in these ideologies. If there is no suitable past, it can always be invented; indeed, in the nature of things there is usually no entirely suitable past, because the phenomenon these ideologies claim to justify is not ancient or eternal but historically novel. This applies both to religious fundamentalism in its current versions—the Ayatollah Khomeini’s version of an Islamic state is no older than the early 1970s—and to contemporary nationalism. The past legitimizes. The past gives a more glorious background to a present that doesn’t have much to show for itself. I recall seeing somewhere a study of the ancient civilization of the cities of the Indus Valley with the title *5000 Years of Pakistan*. Pakistan was not even thought of before 1932-1933, when the name was invented by some student militants. It did not become a serious political aspiration until 1940. As a state it has existed only since 1947. There is no evidence of any more connection between the civilization of Mohenjo Daro and the current rulers of Islamabad than there is of a connection between the Trojan War and the government in Ankara, which is at present claiming the return, if only for first public exhibition, of Schliemann’s treasure of King Priam of Troy. But 5000 years of Pakistan somehow sounds better than forty-six years of Pakistan.

In this situation historians find themselves in the unexpected role of political actors. I used to think that the profession of history, unlike that of, say, nuclear physics, could at least do no harm. Now I know it can. Our studies can turn into bomb factories like the workshops in which the IRA has learned to transform chemical fertilizer into an explosive. This state of affairs affects us in two ways. We have a responsibility to historical facts in general, and for criticizing the politico-ideological abuse of history in particular.

I need say little about the first of these responsibilities. I would not have to say anything, but for two developments. One is the current fashion for novelists to base their plots on recorded reality rather than inventing them, thus

fudging the border between historical fact and fiction. The other is the rise of “postmodernist” intellectual fashions in Western universities, particularly in departments of literature and anthropology, which imply that all “facts” claiming objective existence are simply intellectual constructions. In short, that there is no clear difference between facts and fiction. But there is, and for historians, even for the most militantly antipositivist one’s among us, the ability to distinguish between the two is absolutely fundamental. We cannot invent our facts. Either Elvis Presley is dead or he isn’t. The question can be answered unambiguously on the basis of evidence, insofar as reliable evidence is available, which is sometimes the case. Either the present Turkish government, which denies the attempted genocide of the Armenians in 1915, is right or it is not. Most of us would dismiss any denial of this massacre from serious historical discourse, although there is no equally unambiguous way to choose between different ways of interpreting the phenomenon or fitting it into the wider context of history. Recently Hindu zealots destroyed a mosque in Ayodhya, ostensibly on the grounds that the mosque had been imposed by the Muslim Moghul conqueror Babur on the Hindus in a particularly sacred location which marked the birthplace of the god Rama. My colleagues and friends in the Indian universities published a study showing a) that nobody until the nineteenth century had suggested that Ayodhya was the birthplace of god Rama and b) that the mosque was almost certainly not built in the time of Babur. I wish I could say that this has had much effect on the rise of the Hindu party which provoked the incident, but at least they did their duty as historians, for the benefit of those who can read and are exposed to the propaganda of intolerance now and in the future. Let us do ours.

Few of the ideology of intolerance are based on simple lies or fictions for which no evidence exists. After all, there was a battle of Kosovo in 1389; the Serb warriors and their allies were defeated by the Turks, and this did leave deep scars on the popular memory of the Serbs, although it does not follow that this justifies the oppression of the Albanians, who now form 90 percent of the region’s population, or the Serb claim that land is essentially theirs. Denmark does not claim the large part of eastern England which was settled and ruled by Danes before the eleventh century, which continued to be known as the Danelaw and whose village names are still philological Danish.



The most usual ideological abuse of history is based on anachronism rather than lies. Greek nationalism refuses Macedonia even the right to its name on the ground that all Macedonia is essentially Greek and part of a Greek nation-state, presumable ever since the father of Alexander the Great, king of Macedonia, became the ruler of the Greek lands on the Balken peninsula. Like everything about Macedonia, this is far from a purely academic matter, but it takes a lot of courage for a Greek intellectual to say that, historically speaking, it is nonsense. There was no Greek nation-state or any other single political entity for the Greeks in the fourth century BC; the Macedonian empire was nothing like the Greeks or any other modern nation-state, and in any case it is highly probable that the ancient Greeks regarded the Macedonian rulers, as they did their later Roman rulers, as barbarians and not as Greeks, though they were doubtless too polite or cautious to say so.

Moreover, Macedonia is historically such an inextricable mixture of ethnicities-not for nothing has it given its name to French mixed fruit salads (*macedonia*) - that any attempt to identify it with a single nationality cannot be correct. In fairness, the extremes of emigrant Macedonian nationalism should also be dismissed for the same reason, as should all the publications in Croatia which somehow try to turn Zvonimir the Great into the ancestor of President Tujman. But it is difficult to stand up against the inventors of a national schoolbook history, although some historians in Zagreb University, whom I am proud to count as friends, have the courage to do so.

These and many other attempts to replace history by myth and invention, are not merely bad intellectual jokes. After all, they can determine what goes into schoolbooks, as the Japanese authorities knew, when they insisted on a sanitized version of the Japanese war in China for use in Japanese classrooms. Myth and inventions are essential to the politic of identity by which groups of people today, defining themselves by ethnicity, religion, or the past or present borders of states, try to find some certainty in an uncertain and shaking world by saying, "We are different from and better than the others". They are our concern in the universities because the people who formulate those myths and inventions are educated people: schoolteachers, lay and clerical, professors (not many, I hope) journalists, TV and radio producers. Today most of them will have gone to some university. Make no mistake about it. History is not ancestral memory or collective tradition. It is what people learned from priests, schoolmasters, the writers of history books, and the compilers of magazine articles and TV programs. it is very important for historians to remember their responsibility, which is, above all, to stand aside from the passion of identity politics-even if they also feel them. After all, we are human beings too.

How serious an affair this may be is shown in a recent article by the Israeli writer Amos Elon about the way in

which the genocide of the Jews by Hitler has been turned into a legitimizing myth for the existence of the state of Israel. More than this : in the years of right-wing government it was turned into a sort of national ritual assertion of Israeli state identity and superiority and a central item of the official system of national beliefs, alongside God. Elon, who traces the evolution of this transformation of the concept of "the Holocaust" argues, following the recent minister of education of the new Israeli Labor government, that history must now be separated from national myth ritual, and politics. As a non-Israeli, though a Jew., I express no views about this. However, as a historian I sadly note one observation by Elon. It is that the leading contributions to the scholarly historiography of the genocide, whether by Jews or non-Jews, were either not translated into Hebrew, like Hilberg's great work, or were translated considerable delay, and then sometimes with editorial disclaimers. The serious historiography of the genocide has not made it any less of an unspeakable tragedy. It was merely at variance with the legitimizing myth.

Yet this very story gives us ground for hope. For here we have mythological or nationalist history being criticized from within. I note that the history of the establishment of Israel ceased to be written in Israel essentially as national propaganda or Zionist polemic about forty years after the state came into being. I have noticed the same in Irish history. About half a century after most of Ireland won its independence, Irish historians no longer wrote the history of their island in term of the mythology of the national liberation movement. Irish history, both in the Republic and in the North, is producing brilliant work because it has succeeded in so liberating itself. This is still a matter that has political implications and risks. The history that is written today breaks with the old tradition which stretches from the Fenians to the IRA, still fighting in the name of the old myths with guns and bombs. But the fact that a new generation has grown up which can stand back from the passions of the great traumatic and formative moments of their countries' history is a sign of hope for historians.

However, we cannot wait for the generations to pass. We must resist the *formation* of national, ethnic, and other myths, as they are being formed. It will not make us popular. Thomas Masaryk, founder of the Czechoslovak republic, was not popular when he entered politics as the man who proved, with regret but without hesitation, that the medieval manuscripts on which much of the Czech national myth was based were fakes. But it has to be done, and I hope those of you who are historians will do it.

That is I wanted to say about the duty of historians. However, before I close, I want to remind you of one other thing. You , as students of this university, are privileged people. The odds are that, as alumni of a distinguished and prestigious institute you will, if you choose, have a good status in society, have better careers, and earn more



than other people, though not so much as successful businessmen. What I want to remind you of is something I was told when I began to teach in a university. "The people for whom you are there" said my own teacher, "are not the brilliant students like yourself. They are the average students with boring minds who get uninteresting degrees in the lower range of the second class, whose examination scripts all read the same. The first class people will look after themselves, though you will enjoy teaching them. The others are the ones who need you."

That applies not only to the university but to the world. Governments, the economy, schools, everything in society, are not for the benefit of the privileged minorities.

We can look after ourselves. It is for the benefit of the ordinary run of people, who are not particularly clever or interesting (unless, of course, we fall in love with one of them), not highly educated, not successful or destined for success, in fact, nothing very special. It is for the people who, throughout history, have entered history outside their neighborhoods as individuals only in the records of their births, marriages, and deaths. Any society worth living in is one designed for them, not for the rich, the clever, the exceptional, although any society worth living in must provide room and scope for such minorities. But the world is not made for our personal benefit, nor are we in the world that claims that this is its purpose is not a good world, and ought not to be a lasting one.

We publish below an article written a few weeks after the communal violence that erupted in India following the destruction of the Babri Masjid. It raises some questions, valid for us too, about the role of religion and the concept of secularism in India.

A NATION AT WAR WITH ITSELF

Gyanendra Pandey

This is not an attempt to pose the problem raised by Ayodhya. It is but one among a growing number of statements by concerned citizens of this country expressing anguish and anger at all that is happening around us— at our political leaders' refusal to take even those minimal steps that are necessary to stop the killings that have gone on for five weeks now, and our own inability to do anything to force these so called 'servants of the people' to do their duty or get out.

In Surat, bands of 'Hindu' hoodlums indulge in the worst kind of torture of woman and gang rape and find the time to set up lights and videotape their brutalities. In Bombay, the rioters search out individual Muslims by name— well known artists, journalists, film makers, or just the shopkeeper in the neighborhood— and immediately declare that they have 'fled to Pakistan' when the houses of the terrorised individuals and families are found abandoned and locked.

In Assam, they surround Muslim habitations and set fire to their huts, triumphantly ensuring that not a single man, woman or child escapes alive. At sundry railway stations across the country, they pull out passengers who happened to have been born in the wrong community, lynch some, burn some and brand the genitals of others. The photographers who spoke up after the Ayodhya events of 6 December 1992 was right: 'If this is Hindu *raj* (rule), we want none of it.'

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Events like this have come to pass not only because land sharks have got into the act, because large sections of the urban poor are desperate and angry, because 'criminal' elements run riot whenever law and order collapses. They have come about because we have acquiesced in the steady erosion of democratic values and all sense of public spirit in our public life, because too many of us have been silent for too long. In a more immediate sense, this war against ourselves has come upon us because people at the helm of Indian affairs, those in power and those who would be, have shown scant respect for the law, for the Constitution they swear by, for the rights of minorities, and for human life.

New 'National Culture'

At the first threat of public agitation, the Government of India allows Hindu worshippers the right of *darshan* (blessing) at the disputed 'Ram Janmabhoomi' site, unmindful of both the illegality and the all round condemnation of the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December: for the Congress cannot afford to lose the 'Hindu' vote. Within days of the Ayodhya 'tragedy' (as it was described by all shades of political opinion, including the BJP), the Prime Minister deems it necessary to go - for atonement? - not to Ayodhya, but to Tirupati. Visiting the riot-ravaged suburb of Seelampur in Delhi is not possible for there is much more important business to perform, such as offering flowers at the *samadhi* (memorial) of Sanjay Gandhi on his death anniversary. Bombay reels under the most savage and prolonged violence that

