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## THE ABUSE OF HISTORY

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[T]hough God cannot alter the past, historians can.”

— Samuel Butler (1901)

### Introduction

Most would agree that history, if written responsibly, is characterized by two ineluctable duties, one epistemological, the other ethical: the duties of accuracy and sincerity. *Responsible history* understood as accurate *and* sincere history sets floors, not ceilings. It is not the same as scientific history (which is responsible history that passes evidential or truth tests) or competent history (which is scientific history that passes peer-review or quality tests).

The opposite of responsible history is *irresponsible history*: history characterized by either a lack of accuracy *or* sincerity or both. Irresponsible history bifurcates into negligent and abusive history. Negligent history lacks accuracy and is sloppy or reckless in its execution; abusive history lacks honesty and is willingly and knowingly deceptive. With these basic distinctions in mind, a definition of the abuse of history (and its synonym, the misuse of history) would be:

*The abuse of history is the use of history with intent to deceive.*

This definition does not say that the abuse of history is its use with intent to deceive *and resulting in harm to others*. This has a clear reason. *If* one excludes those uses of history that are *posing* as abuses for satirical, literary, or educational purposes, the abuse of history is *always* harmful. The victims who suffer the harm belong to three categories. Direct victims are those who have their health, reputation, income, or opportunities harmed, for example, the authors whose work is

plagiarized or falsified, or the persons (alive or dead) whose reputation is maliciously attacked in historical works. Indirect victims consist of all those misled by the deception. Even if the direct and indirect victims do not *feel* harmed, they *are* because abusers, through their deceptive conduct, try to obtain unfair advantages. There is a last victim category: historical writing itself. The abuse of history breaches the integrity of historical writing, lowers its overall quality, and undermines the trust of society in it (De Baets 2009: 15–16).

To say that the abuse of history always harms is not to say that other forms of irresponsible or responsibly history never harm. The findings of responsible history, for instance, may destroy cherished historical myths – exposing distortion, taboos, and lies in the process – and therefore dangerously contribute to social tensions. As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in 1878: “*Fundamental insight*: There is no pre-established harmony between the furthering of truth and the well-being of humanity” (in Williams 2002: 15). A profound look at the rather complicated history of the abuse of history is imperative in order to understand the long and tortuous genealogy of present and future concerns in the field.

## **History of the abuse of history**

Throughout history, notions of truth and sincerity have demonstrably been important as the following examples show. In antiquity, the orator and historian Cicero famously said: “For who does not know history’s first law to be that an author must not dare to tell anything but the truth? And its second that he must make bold to tell the whole truth? That there must be no suggestion of partiality anywhere in his writings? Nor of malice?” (Cicero 1976: II, 62). Much later, during the Middle Ages, Dante in his mesmerizing *La divina commedia* put the band of the fraudulent in the eighth circle of Hell. Within this last but one circle, falsifiers and liars were located in the tenth and deepest ditch. And, fast forwarding to present times, the International Committee for Historical Sciences added a clause to article 1 of its Constitution in 2005, saying that “It shall defend freedom of thought and expression in the field of historical research and teaching, and is opposed to the misuse of history and shall use every means at its disposal to ensure the ethical professional conduct of its members.”

Notwithstanding these age-old distinctions between truth and falsity, the problem arises whether the demarcation between the use and abuse of history is a traditional one that has always

existed or a modern one. Tackling this problem is a challenge and not only because the field is so wide. The further one moves away from the present and from countries with firm historiographical traditions, the less obvious is the classic definition of the historian as the professional expert who methodically studies the past. Scribes, storytellers, and *griots* fulfilled many of the functions of historians in the past. Any comparison over time, therefore, must take a broad view of the practitioners of history. Another reason that complicates the problem is that most of the *general* literature about abuses addresses Western situations (but see Vansina 1985: 54–56, 129–30; Smith 1971; Fernández-Armesto: 1997). Only insofar as non-Western historical writing operates in ways similar to Western historical writing are lessons from the latter applicable to the former. The history of the abuse of history in the West shows some remarkable trends and constants.

### *Trends*

A bird eye's view of attitudes toward key epistemological components of the historiographical operation – truth, method, motive, and authorship – can shed more clarity on historical attitudes toward the abuse of history. Before 1800, oral societies and societies in transition to a written and printed culture entertained several coexisting notions of truth. The notion of *factual truth* meant that a true statement about the past corresponded to past reality. In the West, this idea of an objective conception of the past can be traced back to Thucydides (Williams 2002: 149–71, 276). Along with this notion, other powerful conceptions linked historical truth not to past reality, but to its observers. The notion of *moral truth* made truth dependent on the *intention* of its observers. A true statement about the past was a statement made by trustworthy persons. Truth did not reflect what had happened, but what ought to have happened according to these honest observers (Clanchy 1993: 148–49; Smith 1971; Constable 1983: 13, 16, 23–26, 30, 33, 36, 38; but see Brown 1988: 105–106). Yet another notion, *orthodox truth*, made truth dependent on the status of the speaker and associated it with authority and tradition. According to this conception, a true statement about the past was an old and authoritative statement. The example rather than the original set the tone (Constable 1983: 27; Eco 1990: 187; Vansina 1985: 129–30; Fernández-Armesto 1997: 46–81; Mallon 1989: 3). Whenever moral and orthodox truth prevailed, imitation and quotation of past masters, acknowledged or not, were not only inevitable but also desirable;

they were signs of respect instead of disrespect. In this context of highly valued tradition, the wisdom of old masters was conveniently adapted (and sometimes the old masters themselves were invented) to satisfy the needs, emotions, and interests of the moment (Bloch 1967: 43–44). These three truth conceptions coexisted over centuries and cultures (and still do) and went largely unchallenged before 1800.

The view of how to methodically test evidence also changed. The slow development of the historical-critical tools necessary for writing history responsibly has been studied by Herbert Butterfield (1974: 464, 475–77, 484–85, 487). Historians, he maintained, have always known that people, including source producers and storytellers, made mistakes or were capable of being dishonest. This, however, did not prevent historical criticism from evolving unusually slowly and unevenly into the sophisticated method in use today. For centuries, human beings did not see clearly how they might correct untrustworthy history or reconstruct forgotten history. The analytic achievements of the seventeenth century and the hesitant transition of history into a science and a profession in the nineteenth, eventually led to the necessary level of training, technical insight, and bias control.

Another change concerned the perception of the motives for writing history. Roughly, one can distinguish scientific (intrinsic) and nonscientific (instrumental) motives. Whereas the former embody the genuine drive to learn more about history and memory, the latter consist of a large array of rationales to study the past for ulterior motives. Nonscientific motives have always been very common. Before 1800, tolerance of esthetic motives such as embellishing historical narratives with semi-fictitious speeches, for example, was generally high (Haywood 1987: 10). Likewise, the ethical motive embodied in the widely held view that history was philosophy by example and formed a large storehouse of moral lessons had huge appeal and received an unreserved welcome unthinkable today. After 1800, the systemic capacity of instrumental motives to corrupt history was increasingly recognized and met with more suspicion.

Finally, the idea of individual authorship received very uneven appreciation over time. Such appreciation was, for example, greater during the Hellenistic period than in the western Middle Ages, especially during the so-called golden era of forgery, the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Clanchy 1993: 318–19; Constable 1983: 11–13; Grafton 1990: 24, 36–37). Indeed, during these two centuries marked by a transition from oral to written record, nagging uncertainty persisted about entitlements based on oral testimony. This often provoked a need to commit forgeries

(Clanchy 1993: 322–23). In contrast to oral forgeries, however, forgeries that were written down and printed became permanent (Clanchy 1993: 193, 298; Mallon 1989: 4) and more easily verifiable. The philosopher David Hume claimed that printed books obliged historians to be more careful in avoiding contradictions and incongruities. Therefore, the staggering increase in written documentation in the centuries after the advent of printing, with its unprecedented cross-border circulation, gradually changed the perception of the individuality of authors and sharpened criteria for determining their authenticity and originality (Williams 2002: 151, 170, 172–205, 276, 290).

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth made the scholarly aspect of these epistemological variables – truth, method, motive, and authorship – definitively more prominent. Above all, the change in method was spectacular. Standards of criticism and practices of accountability (quoting, referencing, footnoting) became more rigorous. After 1700, the footnote as an acknowledgment of intellectual debt was introduced, censorship of the press increasingly questioned, the first copyright laws enacted. Terms such as anachronism, fabrication (in the sense of falsehood) and plagiarism made their first appearance, facilitating discussion about abuse with more precision. In the early eighteenth century, the *systematic* use and weighing of evidence – formerly mainly an activity of antiquarians and erudite persons – became accepted practice among historians (Momigliano 1966: 2, 6–7, 9–10, 24–25, 27; Ginzburg 1991: 80, 91).

Professional historical writing has developed on a significant scale since the early nineteenth century only – that is, after the demise of absolutism in the late eighteenth century and the hesitant rise of democracy. It emphasized common methodological rules and made the critical scrutiny of original sources a primary target. Archives, museums, and history institutes came into being. The twin processes of professionalization and institutionalization compelled historians to think more deeply about scientific history – and about their practitioners. The scale at which these processes took place made historians financially more dependent on governments. Paradoxically, this dependence often transformed them into suppliers of official historical truths presented with pretensions of objectivity whereas, in fact, they were often skewed endorsements of nation-building (Iggers 2001: 314–16; Williams 2002: 252; De Baets 2011a). Only gradually did it dawn that under the cloak of objectivity, bias, collective error, and even abuse could flourish.

Another important milestone was the adoption of the *Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works* in 1886. Applicable to historical works, this convention carried an important clause about the moral rights of authors as part of their copyright. In its last revision (1979: Article 6bis1), it stated: "... [T]he author shall have the right to claim authorship of the work and to object to any distortion, mutilation or other modification of, or other derogatory action in relation to, the said work, which would be prejudicial to his honor or reputation." The clause safeguarded the rights to authorship and integrity. Even if today copyright protection is seen as a crucial incentive for intellectual creativity, increasing attention is given to a fair balance between authorial rights and the public interests in information, culture, and science.

### *Constants*

These variables – truth, method, motive, and authorship – evolved against a tapestry of constants. The following in particular are noteworthy. First, although no single abuser profile exists, the subtler abusers always display great skill and sharp historical awareness. Usually, considerable knowledge of history is required to successfully abuse it (LaFollette 1992: 43; Grafton 1990: 61–62). Second, the works of abusers, however corrupt per definition, can be considered as historical sources in their own right and merit preservation in an archive. They inform us less about the period they pretend to treat than about the period in which they were created and the decades and centuries in which they were accepted as true and received as authentic. They are sources for the history of the psychology of their authors – abusers and mythmakers – and for the worldviews of their audiences (Bloch: 1967: 43; Constable 1983: 1–2; Le Goff 1988: 303; Grafton 1990: 67, 125). Third, theories which are rejected today as false may in their time have been integral parts of ideologies, myths, and legends about the world and as such have provided meaning for those who held such beliefs. In addition, some of these false theories may have inspired scientific progress as much as they caused harm. Furthermore, to the extent that deceptive sources and bogus theories emanating from works of abusers were believed by many, they sometimes had important consequences as people could and did act upon them. Umberto Eco (1998) called this the force of falsity. Fourth, to the extent that deceptive sources and theories were *not* believed, they elicited skeptical responses and unintentionally stimulated the development of the historical-critical method to separate truth from lie (Bloch: 1967: 41; Schauer 1982: 74–75; Le Goff 1988:

22; Grafton 1990: 5–6, 28, 123–27). Fifth, not only were the motives for abusing history multiple, so were those for exposing it. Personal rivalry and bias often provided an important impetus to unmask untruths (Butterfield 1967: 6–8; Butterfield 1974: 484, 485, 487; Grafton 1990: 83–85, 92–93, 95–98, 117, 126). Sixth, in areas and countries where ancient traditions of textual criticism and criteria for scholarship existed – as in the West, the Islamic world, China, or Japan – discussions about the epistemological and ethical demarcations of knowledge emerged and, consequently, the possibility to think in terms of use and abuse was sharpened. Hence, lies, forgeries, plagiarism have been recognized and condemned from early times, although also sometimes ordered or condoned by the very authorities that recognized and condemned them. Most abusers, including those acting from noble motives, were very well aware that they were abusing history. Many belonged to the cultural elite (Ouy 1961: 1371, 1373; Constable 1983: 16; Clanchy 1993: 319, 321, 325; Brown 1988: 101, 106, 118; Grafton 1990: 36–37, 45, 48–49; Goetz 2001: 351, 358). A last constant is that the value of truth has always been perceived as indispensable for the survival of persons and societies. Persons cannot build relationships that are exclusively or even partially based on lies. Societies cannot build order without trust and trust is not possible without truth (Williams 2002: 63, 163, 271, 276, 285, 290; Fernández-Armesto 1997: 3–4; Danto 2004: 80–81; Parfit 1984: 457–61). Abusing history has been a phenomenon of all times and in its interstices the awareness that it constituted wrongdoing was lingering always.

### *Trends and constants evaluated*

One can see that the distinction between the use and abuse of history is not a modern but an ancient one: at the same time, the perception of that distinction has changed radically over time in important respects.

- *The scope of abuse widened:* The awareness of abuses and the will to call them wrongs were present of old, but there were no clear definitions for abuse or its key element, the intent to deceive, nor for responsible history or its key elements, accuracy and sincerity. On the whole, the effect of looser definitions was a relatively narrow scope of abuse in earlier epochs: much conduct fell outside of its ambit (Williams 2002: 271, 277). Admiration for the skillful liar, for example, was seemingly common in some pre-industrial societies. Literal imitation

without mention of the source was not always understood as plagiarism or theft. After 1800, the scope widened: more conduct was seen as abusive.

- *The criteria for abuse sharpened:* The wrongs that did fall within the scope of abuse were increasingly recognized, increasingly condemned, and decreasingly glossed over.
- *The justifications for abuse narrowed:* Before 1800, the border between intent and motive was conveniently blurred all too often. Motives for abusive conduct could be beautified and then serve as a basis for condoning and excusing abuses to a degree that gradually became unacceptable.
- *The tools to combat abuse multiplied:* The eagerness to expose abuse has always existed but the critical tools to prove it only gradually became more rigorous, often as a direct consequence of the will to expose the abuse of history by rivals. The absence of sophisticated evidential tools hampered the detection of abuses for centuries.

The transition from memory to written and printed record marked a first major step in all these developments. The increasingly scientific perceptions of historical scholarship and the firmer embedment of that scholarship in academic institutions and professions after 1800 in the West, however, were decisive. The fact that present evaluations of present abuses differ considerably from past evaluations of past abuses, should make us cautious when dealing with present evaluations of past abuses.

## **Current issues**

### *The theory gap of the 2020s*

The nutshell history just given made it clear that the abuse of history has always been an obvious area of – fragmented – attention to historians. At the same time, it is also an underestimated area, so much so that the theoretical debate about the ethics of historians and its shadowy counterpart, the abuse of history, tends to lag behind the debate about scientific integrity and misconduct in general, a debate which has been explosive over the last decades. To refine this observation even more, while theoretical attention for the ethics of historians has slowly increased, theoretical attention for the abuse of history has made no significant progress. This strange situation requires clarification.

Rolf Torstendahl (2001: 6868) observed that at the end of the twentieth century no unanimity existed about common norms or a common identity in the historical profession. This may have changed slowly from the 1990s under the influence of the fall of dictatorships and of reinvigorated waves of democracy and human rights awareness. These and other trends (De Baets 2009: 173–75) may have led to more attention for ethical problems in general. Applied to historical writing, the field of the *ethics of history*, which studies moral judgments about historical figures and our relationship with the dead, should be distinguished from the field of the *ethics of historians*, which observes the ethical conduct of historians. Only the latter is dealt with here, and progress in this field has been moderate. The appearance in 2002 of perhaps the most important work in the area, *Truth & Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* – written by the most historically oriented moral philosopher, Bernard Williams – was almost completely ignored in historians’ circles. In addition, not more than ten national historical associations possess codes of ethics today. Work on codes of ethics in neighboring disciplines with more direct contact to their subjects of study or the latter’s representatives – archives, museums, and archaeology – has been far more advanced; likewise, subdisciplines of history working with oral testimonies or confidential written materials have shown more sensitivity to ethics than others (early codification attempts in Gilissen 1960: 1037–39; Samaran 1961: xii–xiii; Fischer 1970: 314–18). More recently, the old debate about enforceable duties setting floors and scholarly virtues setting best practices in the historical profession has sparked moderate new interest. Overall, the impact of the global human rights movement has probably been the single most fruitful factor for thinking legally and ethically about the broader environment in which historians operate (De Baets 2018).

If one turns to the other side of the ethics of historians – the abuse of history – a startling observation by the Slovak Miroslav Kusý (1984–85) exemplifies the situation before 1985. A dismissed philosopher-turned-unskilled worker under “normalization” in Communist Czechoslovakia, Kusý complained that renowned historians like Marc Bloch (1967) and Edward Carr (1973) did not pay any attention to the difficulties and risks of the historical profession and the historian’s vulnerability in their highly acclaimed works on the methodology of history. Sadly, both were very vulnerable themselves and became victims of censorship and repression. Carr’s multivolume *History of Soviet Russia* has been banned in the Soviet Union for four decades. Bloch’s name disappeared from the cover of the *Annales* during the German occupation

of France (although he continued to contribute under a pseudonym); he died at the hands of the Gestapo near Lyons in 1944.

Despite Kusý's astute observation, many handbooks of historical methodology (e.g., Bernheim 1903; Langlois and Seignobos 1992) that are used worldwide in academic curricula traditionally pay some theoretical attention to one important aspect of responsible history, namely when they discuss the so-called "internal criticism of the lie and the error" (by which the lies and errors of source producers, not of historians, are meant), or when they comment upon the many nonscientific motives for the writing of history. In addition to these omnipresent works, some debates are noteworthy. The discussions in the American Historical Association about their *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct* from the 1970s and their complaints adjudication procedure in existence until 2003, deserve special mention. So does the adaptation of the Constitution of the International Committee of Historical Sciences in 2005, signaled above; it was a reaction against the attacks on the historical profession in India in the early 2000s. At local levels, abuse-related affairs and scandals certainly accelerated processes of reflection, but by and large the global discussion about violations of academic freedom and scientific integrity did not resonate widely or enduringly within the community of historians.

Alongside a remarkable reluctance to see "big ethical principles" as a full-fledged part of the historiographical operation and hence to discuss, codify, or implement them, two further reasons help explain the theory gap. Perhaps surprisingly, the opposition to abuses of history is a most difficult and delicate undertaking, not only in dictatorships, but also in democracies. If abuse is combated at all, it is usually limited to the single case happening to be in the spotlights at a given moment or to one specific genre of abuse without the benefit of insight into the general theoretical structure of abuse. An entirely different reason may lie in caricaturing attitudes toward positivism and postmodernism. Historians emphatically pleading for accuracy are often cornered as nineteenth-century positivists who naively believe that no interpretation is needed because the facts, discoverable after research, speak for themselves. This has led to a largely undeserved debunking of methodology handbooks who gave surveys of the traditional tools of historical criticism as they were perfected in the nineteenth century. At the same time, postmodernism's key insight that the historical truth arising from research was not only the product of epistemological efforts but to some degree also of relatively contingent decisions of communities of historians had the strange side-effect that most historians shied away from an explicit, let alone

glowing, defense of the existence of historical truth. In the following, an outline for an encompassing theory of the abuse of history is given to help fill the theory gap.

### *Outline for a theory*

Any theory of the abuse of history should identify its main focus, its principal beneficiaries, and its surplus value. The central focus of the theory are those abusing history; they must be identifiable persons and groups. The theory is ill-suited to approach historical myths of remote origin as abuses of history if it is impossible to identify their creators or to recover the intent with which they operated (also Schöpflin 1997). Furthermore, the theory should offer a framework of insights and guidelines to academic historians in the first place. Such a theory would be of much benefit as well to other producers of history – nonacademic historians, teachers, students, and all those using history in their arguments up to and including states. It would also be an asset for third parties who want to evaluate the claims of all these history practitioners.

There are, of course, similarities between the following outline and broader theories of scientific integrity and misconduct. These underscore that history is part of science and scholarship. However, a complete theory should also target discipline-specific issues. The first task of any theory is to bring order into the bewildering varieties of abuse. Two complementary typologies will be presented to that end.

### *Typology of abuses according to historiographical level*

An insightful typology can be constructed by splitting the historiographical operation into three levels: the historian's work (the epistemological level), upstream of it (the heuristic level), and downstream of it (the pragmatic level). At the heuristic level, the unit of analysis is the data perceived as sources or sets of records (archives). At the epistemological level, it is the data perceived as words or sets of words (statements of fact and opinion, including theories, explanations, interpretations, or moral judgments). At the pragmatic level, it is the data perceived as a whole (the historical work itself) and the use made of it by their authors and others. Evidently, abuses at one level may overlap with those at the next.

When historians collect sources in inappropriate ways, they commit *heuristic abuses*. These practices include the intentional destruction of cultural heritage and archival cleansing. They also cover breaches of the integrity of individual sources, such as their irresponsible collection (theft, piracy), their irresponsible treatment (plagiarism, falsification, tampering with references and notes), the obstruction of their accessibility (overclassification, reclassification), and their wholesale fabrication.

When historians dishonestly change the evidential value of their work in order for it to pass the truth test – by omitting, trimming, or inventing data or by stretching interpretations – they commit *epistemological abuses*. This is the classic form of abuse committed during the description and analysis of data while teaching or doing research. It includes the malicious selection or omission altogether of relevant data, the breach of confidentiality pledges, the misuse of the rules of logic, methodology, rhetoric, and narration, and the passing of malicious or reckless moral judgments about historical figures.

*Pragmatic abuses* of history occur after a completed manuscript has entered the process of publication. It includes, first of all, lies about the author's autobiography and lies in the work's front and back matter. Another dimension is the inappropriate interference of third parties, for example, the official and private providers of data, assignments, contracts, and funding if they impose nonscientific conditions aimed at hiding unwelcome findings. Other types of pressure may come from censors, editors, and publishers. Special attention should also be given to peer reviewers and their interests because they possess much power during procedures of publication, employment, tenure, promotion, grants, congresses, and prizes, and usually shield behind anonymity. Finally, some beneficiaries of the historical work such as the mass media, book reviewers, or political leaders can also distort its contents (Bernheim 1903: 300–358; Bloch 1967: 41–52; Eco 1990: 174–202; Fischer 1970: 82–87; Grafton 1990: 36–68; Jaubert 1986; Langlois and Seignobos 1992: 133–58; Ouy 1961: 1367–83; Vansina 1985: 95–114). Interventions by third parties always have repercussions and often leave traces at the heuristic and epistemological levels of abuse.

In principle, this triple typology is valid for all genres, fields, categories, and periods of history. All historiographical *genres* may be affected but many believe that some are more amenable to abuse than others. Source editions, time lists, biographical genres, maps, photographs, reference works, and history textbooks have all been mentioned as genres especially

vulnerable to abuse. All *fields* fall within the ambit of abuse, particularly the risky fields of political, military and colonial history, but also religious, economic, social, and cultural history. Abusers are as active in the *category* of popular history, whether written, spoken, or visual, as they are in academic history, and probably even more so. The reach and potential influence of popular history (and history textbooks) is usually wider than academic history because of its greater accessibility and broader audience. Depending on the abuser's needs, all historical *periods* – from archaeology over medieval periods to recent history – have been the object of abuse, especially if key events from them were central to foundational myths or official propaganda. Of all these periods, contemporary history has usually been singled out as a special target for abuse – despite (or perhaps due to) the fact that witnesses of important current events are still alive and may stand up anytime as eyewitnesses to correct key elements in falsified versions.

#### *Typology of abuses according to political regime*

The pragmatic type of abuse pitted abuses committed by history producers out of their free will against abuses committed by history producers either under pressure or after direct intervention from others. As a rule, inappropriate interventions of third parties are systemic in dictatorships but not in democracies. Clearly, states in which the lives of individuals are weakly protected cannot be states in which histories about the lives of these individuals are strongly respected. This justifies a closer look at these two regime types.

The natural habitat for abuses of history is a nondemocratic environment because history is put at the service of official ideology without any restraint. In dictatorships, the topics most suited for historical propaganda (which is the systematic manipulation of historical facts or opinions by, or with the connivance of, the government or other powers) are those illustrating this official ideology. Antecedents and historical parallels favorable to the dictator in power will be praised, enemies and heresies diabolized. By the same token, topics viewed as controversial and sensitive are those calling into question that official ideology (De Baets 2011b). They attract censorship (which is the systematic control of historical facts or opinions by, or with the connivance of, the government or other powers). Censorship is a form of abuse of history committed under the control of others. It is a structural feature of dictatorships, but not of other regimes. Precensorship, invisible to the public, attempts to regulate research at prepublication stage. Postcensorship curtails

the expression after its utterance. Publications are banned, teaching courses interfered with, lectures boycotted. Because it is done so openly, postcensorship generates a chilling effect on the free expression about history.

On the list of historical topics constantly monitored by censors in dictatorships are allusions to the illegitimate origins and violent maintenance of power, crimes committed by the regime and its interest in covering them up, rivalry among its leaders, discord among the population, controversial information about subjugated minorities and classes, crises (periods of martial law, revolt and civil war), tensions with other countries, military defeat, periods of humiliation and weakness, the history of successful rivals, and, finally, historical parallels to all these areas (De Baets 2011b). The more central the role of history in the dictatorial ideology, the more devastating and abusive the impact of censorship on historical writing. In principle, totalitarian dictatorships are more dangerous than authoritarian ones as they not only tried to silence but also to convert their citizens.

Despite all political supervision, professional historians working in such circumstances were seldom the willing executioners of some prescribed line. As experts, they always retained some bargaining power because they had to implement general propaganda and censorship guidelines to many specific historical problems and contexts or translate them into detailed curricula and textbooks. Doing so is dangerous but at the same time they are able to create margins that increase as one moves further from the kernel of ideology. In the safer areas removed from the axioms of ideology, contributions to historical writing could still be valuable, even lasting. The same goes for work published underground or in exile. Some of it was polemical and rancorous, some written with innovative methodology or perspectives. This description of historians living under or with dictatorship implies that purely instrumental theories of historical writing fail. Complexity and detail matter.

When societies emerge from dictatorship or conflict and evolve toward democracy, the harm suffered by historical writing during the preceding period gradually comes to light. The credibility of history is shaken because under the dictatorship it had condoned lies and fabrication (De Baets 2015). The scars could remain visible for years. In consolidated democracies, the abuse of history is less systematic – although not necessarily less frequent – than in dictatorships. Three areas in particular tend to generate red alerts in a climate of free expression: archives (at the heuristic level), genocide denial (at the epistemological level), and commissioned histories (at the pragmatic level) (De Baets 2011b). When secrecy rules for current and archival records are

excessive, illegal, or both, they lead to censorship; intelligence services in particular are often keen to hide their “family jewels.” Furthermore, groups denying corroborated atrocity crimes are abusers of history. Professional historians categorically reject the views of deniers, but the former remain divided as to whether and when the propagation of such views should be prohibited or criminalized (De Baets 2018). Finally, histories commissioned by governments or others are sometimes subtly adapted to avoid unwelcome messages. In these officially commissioned histories, topics that touch the nerves of embarrassment and shame in democracies are mostly tied to internal conflicts and international wars of the past – often in combination with imperial or colonial expansion: Democracies at home were often dictatorships abroad (De Baets 2016).

### *Evidence of abuse*

Once clarity is obtained by identifying abuse levels (heuristic, epistemological, and pragmatic) and abuser types (autonomous and pressured historians), one can look into the elements of the abuse that in combination provide evidence for it. Material elements comprise the alleged abusive conduct itself, its consequences, and the circumstances and broader context in which it took place, whereas mental elements relate to how abusers think while they commit abuse. The conduct itself consists of an act or omission. Although abusive conduct always has harmful consequences, it can be difficult to track the harm with precision as its impact is often unclear, delayed, or unknown. If its impact is known, it may remain uncertain how it can be repaired. The abuse is also embedded in specific circumstances: These can be factual, as when they relate to outside pressure, blackmail, or workload, or legal, as when the law prohibits the abusive conduct. One of the most important variables is whether the abuser acted alone or belonged to a group, and whether the conduct was exceptional or part of a widespread or systematic pattern. The context of the historian’s conduct, finally, is an extension of the circumstances. It is relevant to know whether the abuse was committed during a war or under a dictatorship, for instance, or in the twelfth or the twentieth century.

The mental element consists of the *intent* of the abuser. Intent (or intention) is usually calibrated in degrees from weak to strong, most often ranging from negligently and recklessly at the weaker end to knowingly and willingly at the stronger end (Gross 1979: 93–98). If the abuser’s attitude is negligent and reckless (the latter being grossly negligent), the resulting

conscious or unconscious conduct can be called negligent history. If the abuser's attitude is premeditated and the conduct is performed knowingly and willingly, the resulting conduct is abusive history, which is never unconscious. The stronger the degree of intent, the more the harm resulting from the conduct is under control of the abuser and the larger the latter's responsibility. The differing degrees of intent explain why the distinction between the two forms of irresponsible history – negligent and abusive history – is so useful. Extremes such as negligent micro-abuses on one side and abusive historical narratives used to incite genocide on the other, are both forms of irresponsible history but require further refinement as negligent and abusive history respectively.

### *Intention versus motive*

Intent is not the same as motive. The distinction is rarely made among historians but it is crucial in the debate about the abuse of history (Bevir 1999: 286–304). Intent indicates *how* abusers act, motive determines *why* they act. Proof of intent is indirect. Naturally, some acts *automatically* imply malicious intent, for example, stealing a manuscript. But there are gray areas and degrees of appreciation between error, distortion, and outright lie. Usually, the mental element is inferred from relevant material elements and, to a lesser degree, from abuser confessions. Evidence about motives is no less problematic than proof of intent. A certain conduct can have one motive, but also none or several. In addition, actors are often barely conscious of their motives, and, when asked to express them, they do not necessarily provide clear, logical, or true answers. Rationalization of motives is a frequent practice. Almost always, writing history rests upon a combination of motives. Generally, two main groups can be distinguished: scientific and nonscientific motives. Scientific motives guide the search for historical truths; nonscientific motives put historical writing at the service of other goals.

Nonscientific motives are very common and sometimes overriding. A list would certainly include didactic, educational, cultural, moral, philosophical, religious, metaphysical, therapeutic, recreational, literary, esthetic, artistic, psychological, economic, commercial, professional, ideological, racial, ethnic, political, social, genealogical, or legal motives (Bernheim 1903: 301–302, Bloch 1967: 43; Gallie 1968: 126–39; Grafton 1990: 37–49, Langlois and Seignobos 1992: 141–45, Vansina 1985: 91–93). Nonscientific motives are acceptable, provided they remain

compatible with scientific ones. They do not necessarily lead to nonscientific history, although some can ignite negligence or malicious intent under certain circumstances, especially if they focus on favoring oneself (or one's group) and on excluding others. The *risk* of abuse enhances whenever scientific motives drop in importance.

The list of nonscientific motives reveals that intent, but not motive, is necessary to *determine whether* an abuse took place; and that motive, but not intent, is necessary to *explain why* the abuse took place and whether and how severely it needs to be punished. Historically, many abusers acted with malicious intent out of noble or acceptable motives. Noble or acceptable motives, however, do not make an abuse less abusive; an abuse is abusive because of its intent to deceive. This is reflected in the definition of abuse given at the outset.

The list also clearly demonstrates that the abuse of history need not always be *political*, as many persistently think. Certainly, political motives are powerful, as was seen in the typology of abuses based on political regime. In addition, nonpolitical motives often have a political background or contain a political dimension. And governments are frequently the ultimate causes of the most serious abuses of history. But abuses of history do not spring from political reasons alone.

### *Some puzzles regarding the importance of abuse*

Attempts to determine the *importance* of abuses are brain-twisters. A first puzzle is whether omission of data is worse than falsification of data. Irresponsible omission renders relevant data (sources, statements, and works) entirely or partly untraceable and makes it harder to identify and measure the abuse and the harm it generates. This would imply that heuristic abuse, especially the destruction of unique sources such as diaries, is worse than epistemological and pragmatic abuse. On the untraceability criterion, destruction and omission is worse than falsification (including invention). An opposite view would be that the falsification of data is worse than their omission because, in contrast to what the "blank pages view" suggests, omitting essential data is usually not untraceable at all and can often be spotted quickly whereas distorting them make checks on the plausibility of opinions based upon them harder. A radical variant of that view would argue that falsification and fabrication arouse more distrust of historian's practices than omission

precisely because they are generally more visible and traceable. Each of these views has a point (also Pork 1990).

A second puzzle emerges for omissions and simplifications in works where didactic considerations are commended (history textbooks, popular history, and many scientific works). At which point do didactic omissions of information become unjustifiable gaps? When do legitimate simplifications in descriptions of events become intolerable distortions? The tipping point is difficult to define.

A third puzzle presents itself when a threshold for epistemological abuse has to be fixed. The question here is how to determine whether, in a given text  $T$ , consisting of a number of statements  $S$ , the presence of a single abusive statement  $Sa$  – a statement shown to be intentionally false, invented, or maliciously omitted – justifies an overall judgment of “abuse of history” in relation to  $T$ ? Suppose  $T$  consists of 99 true  $S$  and 1  $Sa$ , can  $T$  in its entirety be called an abuse of history or not? Is the author an abuser of history or not? The puzzle can be complicated in several respects. First of all, it is possible that if  $T$  consists of 100 true  $S$  (and zero  $Sa$ ), the resulting interpretation is still false (Williams 2002: 244). Second, a distorted overall interpretation of  $T$  can arguably be called worse than a distorted single  $Sa$  because it is generally  $T$  rather than a particular  $Sa$  that sticks in the reader’s mind. Sometimes, however, the interpretation of  $T$  hinges on one crucial  $Sa$ . Third, skillful and subtle abusers do not blatantly falsify the historical record, but leave intact as much of the past as they can and only alter key passages so as not to arouse suspicion about their purposes. An abuse can be minor in execution, but major in impact. Therefore,  $Sa$  can dominate the interpretation of  $T$ . The answer to the question when this happens, depends on the importance of  $Sa$  within  $T$ . It can save or break careers.

Finally, a fourth puzzle, actually a paradox, arises when lighter forms of negligent history are compared to grosser form of abuse of history. Abusive history is worse than negligent history but rarer. This difference in frequency may reverse their relative importance. Not only does negligent history occur far more frequently than abusive history, much of it is barely visible and detectable. Furthermore, a constantly high frequency of lighter forms poisons the work environment, creating sloppier habits. Once condoned, sloppy habits and rapidly accumulating micro-abuses unchain a slippery slope effect making grosser abuses more likely and acceptable. Viewed from this angle, the lighter, negligent forms of irresponsible history are the most important of all questionable practices, and the grosser forms, because of their lower frequency, less important.

This conclusion implies that negligence and recklessness are far less innocent than their low degree of intent suggests, but also that preventive strategies targeting them can be very successful.

### *The repression of abuse*

Protection against the abuse of history and the harm it causes constitutes a general duty of the historical profession. This is a duty of accountability flowing from the recognition of scholarly expertise by society at large (Altbach 1991). The protection needed can consist in repression or prevention or both. When the avenue of repression is chosen, the first rule is that those accused of an abuse of history are entitled to a fair hearing during which they can mount defenses. One such defense, a strong one, is “justification.” Those accused then argue that the changes they made to a historical source were done in good faith (as part of a scientific restoration, transcription, or textual correction, for example). This annuls the accusation because, on scrutiny, the alleged abuse was not an abuse at all. A weak defense is “ignorance.” Abusers then argue that they did not know that what they did was abusive. This defense is usually not convincing if invoked by professional historians, trained to act as experts, except in cases where no reason existed to suspect corrupt sources. A third defense is “mistake.” The accused then plead that they committed errors. Since everyone, the most accurate included, can commit errors, evaluating this defense should distinguish between small and large-scale and between single and serial. Small and single errors are usually simple, large-scale and serial ones usually blameworthy.

If no defenses can be invoked or if they are baseless, the wrongdoing has to be determined while implementing guarantees of due process, starting from the basic premise that everyone charged with an abuse has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty. Degrees of responsibility should be fixed for the abusers and for other parties involved, such as those aiding them, the possible masterminds who planned and organized the abuse, the censors, or those exerting pressure when providing contracts and budgets.

The next problem is how to sanction the abuse once it is determined. Sanctions can be eliminated partially if valid excuses exist. One valid excuse invokes diminished autonomy and responsibility, covering such diverse cases as when the abuser was a person acting under coercion, or a beginning history student not yet fully versed in professional ethics, or a person

suffering from abnormality. Another valid excuse is based on the maxim that punishment should never inflict more harm than the abuse itself. At all cost, genuine excuses should be distinguished from pseudo-excuses, that is, dishonest justifications or forms of self-deception. Abusers typically use defense pleas such as: “I was distracted, sloppy, stressed, temporarily out of control; my abuse was inadvertent; it was a jest,” while, in fact, this was demonstrably not the case.

Factors mitigating sanctions include circumstances where abusers express regret or repair the harm inflicted, or where just punishment would lead to disproportional consequences for them. Time limits play a role as well, for example, when the abuse is disclosed years after the fact. Sanctions become superfluous anyhow when the abuser is deceased. Aggravating factors must also be taken into account when one deals with masterminds manipulating others, when the abusers were professional historians, or when repetition of the offense led to serial abuse.

As a matter of principle, sanctions for abuses should be applied with restraint and pursue reasonable goals, among them forcing abusers to change their conduct; deterring others from imitating them; repairing harm done to victims; encouraging preventive measures; and preserving the integrity of historical writing. Sanctions should also apply to *attempts* to abuse, but then be less strict than those applied for completed abuses.

As a matter of practice, sanctions can be, first of all, symbolic and include demands to abusers to apologize to victims privately or publicly. Such demands are sometimes backed up with the threat of naming and shaming. Professional sanctions are usually imposed by institutions of higher education, historical associations, or historical journals with complaints procedures. They consist of the withdrawal of publications, reprimands, suspension, stripping of credentials, refusal of promotion, demotion, dismissal, and early retirement. Legal sanctions, finally, are the product of legal settlements and may encompass the seizure of copyright-infringing work, bans, rectifications, penalties, reparations, and prosecution and imprisonment.

In contrast to sanctions of the symbolic and legal types, professional sanctions are relatively rare. Many professional historians resist punishment of their abusive colleagues, notwithstanding the fact that too much indulgence may elicit repetition of the abuse. Two reasons may account for this aversion. Ostensibly, many think that the mere proof of abuse is enough punishment: historians found guilty of abuse lose their reputation and face professional ruin. Another reason may be that professional sanctions conjure up reminiscences of the persecution of historians under repressive regimes.

### *The prevention of abuse*

The prevention of abuse is fostered through the formation of a careful and honest work habit in the first place, especially by acknowledging intellectual debts in notes and literature and by clearly distinguishing quotation and paraphrase. Standard-setting through the development of professional codes of ethics is also important. Awareness can be raised further by teaching professional ethics to students, including teaching about the history of the abuse of history. All these measures are only enduringly successful if they are backed by an institutional and legal infrastructure to implement the standards.

In determining the scope of opposition to abuse, democratic and nondemocratic states should be distinguished. Historians living in dictatorial countries or their colleagues who are allowed to visit them often do not write about the abuses they are aware of because they fear research or career troubles or backlash effects on themselves or their wider circle. The overall result is serious underreporting. In democracies as well, circumstances are often not simple in practice. Tough psychological factors may be at work: inertia, incredulity, ill-conceived collegiality. Also, the sheer volume of work resting on the shoulders of individual historians may delay exposure of known abuse, especially because standards of proof are – and should be – demanding. Furthermore, the historians involved in the exposure are often rivals, colleagues, or subordinates of the abusers.

Disclosing abuses, then, usually requires much expert knowledge, courage, and time – and a context of safety. The experience of whistleblowers – those releasing well-founded information on wrongdoing – is not very reassuring. All too often, they risk becoming targets of intimidation campaigns themselves (and some of these campaigns may be instigated by powerful abusers). The threat of defamation lawsuits, for example, can damage careers of whistleblowers and has traditionally been a powerful deterrent to oppose abuse (also Grosberg 2004: 1337–38). The conclusion must be that the opposition to abuse includes at least five distinct stages: detection, disclosure, refutation, sanction, and prevention. Moreover, the fact that even individual experts have to muster much energy to denounce abuse, renders imperative the collaboration among concerned historians in opposing breaches of ethics.

### *The demarcation debate*

Throughout the outline presented thus far it became clear that the question of when knowledge can be regarded as scientific is of central theoretical concern behind any discussion of the abuse of history. Scientists have often discussed criteria to demarcate scientific knowledge which has passed truth tests from nonscientific knowledge which has not. This is known as the demarcation debate (Popper 1963, 1980; Dolby 1996; Truzzi 1996). Scientific history, then, is historical knowledge that is accepted as an approximation of the historical truth by academic historians after they carried out and discussed evidential tests. But does historical truth exist? Curiously, no question in the theory of history is able to arouse so much controversy, including because of the misunderstandings about positivism and postmodernism signaled above. By and large, five positions are possible:

- Historical truth does not exist.
- Historical truth does not exist; historical truths do.
- Historical truth exists but the concept is provocative.
- Historical truth exists and it is absolute.
- Historical truth exists but it is provisional.

The first position is self-undermining. If truth does not exist, why, then, would one accept as true the proposition that truth does not exist (Finnis 1977: 247–67; Williams 2002: 2–3; Blackburn 2006: 23–44)? If no historical truth existed, scientific history would be impossible. The second position harks back to an age-old philosophical discussion about the potency of concepts to cover all instances of the set they pretend covering. If the concept of “truth” may promise too much, specific instances of it – “truths” – may promise too little. The concept of “truth” can be used at the logical level and its many manifestations as “truths” at the empirical level. The third position is psychological: it prefers the truth concept to be replaced by alternatives as “reliable knowledge” or “trustworthy findings.” This offers no solution because the demarcation debate returns under another guise: Which knowledge is reliable, which finding trustworthy? The fourth position stems from the nineteenth century when absolute confidence in objective factual knowledge led to naïve and pretentious truth claims that few share today. The last position is

prevalent nowadays. It holds that truth has a provisional and perspectival character and that – alongside rigorous respect for corroborated data, method, and peer review – the adoption or rejection of truth claims has also a social dimension in which power, tradition, perspective, bias and contingency play a role (Blackburn 2006: 86–89). Statements of historical fact are amenable to verification tests that prove their truth or falsity with strong probability. Statements of historical opinion can only be subjected to plausibility tests. There are many plausible interpretations about the past, because there are many valid perspectives and many ways to weigh the same verified facts (also Williams 2002: 257–58). But when all is said and done, this view of provisional historical truth leads to real distinctions between tentative truths and knowledge without that status. The notion of historical truth is indispensable to evaluate and to oppose abuses of history.

## **Future developments**

As far as can be speculated at this juncture, two issues will dominate the debate about the abuse of history in the near future: the debate about fake news that abruptly burst onto the scene around 2015 and the related but broader question of whether the abuse of history is on the rise in the twenty-first century.

### *Fake news in its historical context*

Historians who observe the current debate on fake news contextualize it. They note that fake news, as a type of lie that constitutes disinformation, has an ancient pedigree. Indeed, among the plethora of primary sources used by historians to study the past, some are forged, many distorted, and all biased. To filter truth from such sources, they have developed a method of source criticism. Although an old phenomenon, disinformation in the guise of fake news has also some strikingly new features because it spreads on the internet nowadays, mainly via social-media platforms. Everyone can publish and disseminate content, with easily distorted evidence, on an unprecedented scale, at unprecedented speed, and with the capacity to micro-target audiences repeatedly. Although many observers are impressed by the efficiency of online fake news, they remain divided about its real impact.

Historians also note that, in order to counter fake news, the mainstream media has rediscovered one solid tool from the bag of source criticism: fact-checking. Almost as old as science itself, fact-checking has one well-known psychological effect that may have been underestimated for centuries: its risk of backfiring. It seems that many people, when challenged by scientific evidence, become more, not less, entrenched in their beliefs – a phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance. In addition, in dismantling fake news items, fact-checking services are condemned to repeat the main claims of these items (Hobsbawm 1994: 60–61), thus running the risk of fueling their circulation.

Finally, historians point out that there is remarkable continuity among the major distributors of fake news: These have been and still are states. Many governments use disinformation, including historical propaganda, to further their ideologies and policies at home and abroad. In 2017 Freedom House (2017: 8) reported that governments of thirty countries deployed some form of manipulation to distort online information (up from twenty-three in 2016). Alongside states, private parties are increasingly important as providers of fake news on social-media platforms. It is no exaggeration to say that the cumulative effects of fake news – especially if it takes the form of defamation, privacy invasion, hate speech, and war propaganda, as it often does – can violate human rights and undermine the public debate that sustains democracies. As such, it is a real danger.

#### *Fake news emanating from or directed at historians*

When the relationship between fake news and history is scrutinized more in detail, two almost contradictory types should be sharply distinguished: fake news emanating from historians and fake news directed at historians. The first type covers the denial of genocide and related atrocity crimes *after* the facts about these crimes have been amply corroborated. Being fake news, genocide denial is the complete antithesis of science. It is a pernicious form of abuse of history, of pseudohistory, and of intellectual and scientific fraud. Those advocating it – a fringe but growing minority – pose as historians. Not only the Holocaust, but most genocides in history have their deniers (also Shermer and Grobman 2000).

The second, completely different, type of fake news is the false accusation against historians and others writing and speaking about the past in good faith. Works of dissident historians living

in dictatorships have routinely been dismissed as “fake history.” But the critical unofficial history is not false, but the accusation that it is false is false. Spurious accusations as this one aim at stifling dissent as much as censorship does. There is a dangerous paradox at work here: A false charge of fake news is fake news itself. It is falsely doubting the honesty of others in order to harm them. Disinformation, including fake news, is indeed an extreme threat. As insidious as censorship, it is its double.

*The thesis of an increase in abuses*

Whether the abuse of history is on the rise today is uncertain. This thesis is firmly buttressed by two arguments. According to the *argument from demography*, the mere increase of the world population means that more people than ever are capable of abusing history. According to the *argument from education*, global levels of education increase and more groups than ever vocally proclaim that they possess separate identities. These groups enlist history to support their claims, tailoring it to their needs in the process. The result is an explosive growth of mutually incompatible, and often partially falsified, histories (Williams 2002: 213–16).

Other arguments are two-edged. According to the *argument from historical myopia*, if there was less abuse in the further past, this was the result of a smaller scope of abuse, less strict criteria for it, broader justifications for it, and fewer tools to discover it. What looks as an increase in abuses of history in recent decades at first sight, therefore, could well be nothing more than myopia caused by ever stricter contemporary criteria. In addition, we are wildly underinformed about practices in the past that were defined and seen as abuses even then, due to the imperfect detection of abuses and the scarcity of reports about abuses that *were* detected in the more remote past. If we flip this argument, we should note that even today abuses of history are widely underreported. Underreporting abuses has been the default situation in all eras, it is another constant.

According to the *argument from technology*, the easy, virtually global access to the internet allows abusers, including manipulative governments, to execute their abuse massively and anonymously, leaving few, if any, traces – as was suddenly revealed in some fake news scandals. The other side of the argument is that the detection of abuse as well is stimulated by new and

easy tools such as plagiarism checkers or reverse image search and by the accelerating insight that digital literacy is an integral part of critical citizenship.

The *argument from democracy* is also two-sided. The downfall of many dictatorships notorious for their rewriting of history in the late twentieth century resulted in the spread of democracy. In 2005, the United Nations stated that for the first time in world history, the majority of countries were democratic (United Nations Development Programme 2005: 20). By definition, democracies favor free expression and unfettered debate, hence better conditions for responsible history. The chances increase that abuses are detected, exposed, and criticized early. The other side of the argument emphasizes, first of all, that the worldwide wave of democratization stopped around 2005 and was in retreat for the next decade-and-a-half (Freedom House 2019: 1). In addition, even if democracies encourage early abuse detection, they do not prevent abuse per se – and in a paradoxical sense may even enhance the likelihood of their occurrence, if not on the scale of states, then on smaller and less systematic levels. Echoing Nietzsche, Simon Blackburn (2006: 167) formulated this effect as follows: “[T]here is no reason ... to believe that ... freedom makes for truth ... Freedom includes the freedom to blur history and fiction, or the freedom to spiral into a climate of myth, carelessness, incompetence or active corruption. It includes the freedom to sentimentalize the past, or to demonize the others, or to bury the bodies and manipulate the record.”

After weighing the arguments from demography, education, historical myopia, technology, and democracy, the thesis of an increase of abuses seems defensible in absolute terms and undecided in relative terms. The rapidly rising numbers of better educated producers of nonscientific versions of history using digital technologies seriously enhance the risk of abuses in absolute terms, but detection possibilities have grown in parallel, although they may structurally lag behind abuses because of their reactive nature. Nevertheless, an absolute increase does not necessarily imply that in the past there were fewer abuses in proportion to the quantity of versions of history available then, even taking into account less strict criteria at the time. An absolute increase of abuses, then, does neither imply that presently humanity is more inclined to lie about its past than in previous times – nor the opposite. An examination of the thesis of an increase in abuses leads one to conclude rather that the abuse of history requires permanent vigilance and action.

## Conclusion

The historical profession should shoulder the mission to develop more sophisticated theories on the abuse of history and to incentivize the debate about the ethics of historians (as distinct from the debate about the ethics of history). The abuse of history is always morally and professionally wrong and often legally wrong and. It harms always. Whereas responsible history – including a right to err – is protected by academic freedom, the abuse of history is not. Some abuses – those resulting in hate speech and war propaganda – are not even protected by the right to free expression (Schauer 1982: 92, 102; Shils 1997: 160–61; De Baets 2018).

The right to free expression, prominently figuring in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966: Article 19), offers strong protection for historical writing. At the individual level it includes the right of everyone – not just professional historians – to seek the historical truth. At the collective level, societies entertain a robust interest in responsible history that serves as the basis for a free, critical, and public debate because the historical truths that may be their outcome are important in themselves and instrumental in achieving fundamental goals, such as democracy and justice (Schauer 1982: 15–34; De Baets 2015, 2018). Although universal, the freedom of expression about the past is not absolute. Not only does it have well-defined limits, it also comes with “special duties and responsibilities” (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966: Article 19.3). For professional historians, trusted because of their expertise, this “special duty” means that they should write and teach history responsibly, that is, accurately and sincerely. The philosopher André Mercier (1970: 342) once grasped the essence: *Sagesse oblige* (wisdom obligates).

## Keywords

Censorship of history; Demarcation debate; Disinformation; Epistemology; Ethics of historians; Ethics of history; Fake news; Freedom of expression; Genocide denial; Historical propaganda; Historical truth; Pseudohistory; Responsible history; Scientific integrity.

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