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STUDIES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

IN DEFENSE OF HISTORY

Piotr Kowalewski Jahromi in conversation with Antoon De Baets

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Piotr Kowalewski Jahromi: I would like to start with your take on the main topic of this Congress: *Quo vadis historia?* I feel that, before we can predict where history goes, we have to start with the question of where we stand as historians today.

Antoon De Baets: This is a difficult question. Many people fail to predict the future, and historians are no exception. Very few predicted the collapse of the colonial empires or the fall of the Wall as quickly as they actually occurred. There is a beautiful book about this, *The Black*

Swan, written by Nassim Nicholas Taleb. [1] It is an account of very rare and unexpected events with massive consequences, called Black Swans, after David Hume. [2] Earthquakes and wedding partners are Black Swans. In many respects, history in general is a Black Swan too. Now, I can simplify the problem and single out, say, political history. But what counts as political history? Our concept of politics is much broader than just the history of diplomats and heads of state. Today, we also include repertoires of mass action and the activity of lobbies and civil society. This is a completely different political history than in the nineteenth century. The same with social history, which used to focus on elites but over time democratized. And there is also the problem of history producers: their numbers have soared. Depending on the type of history and the type of historian, evaluations and forecasts will differ. In terms of authors and subdisciplines, the scope of history is so wide that it is virtually impossible to say anything robust about the future.

PKJ: Is political history, with its focus on events, still an important reference point for historical practices, or is it now just one of the many branches?

ADB: It is still a very important subdiscipline of history, and it will always be. This is so because it studies power, which is a basic dimension of history. And as much as I like working with big data, for example, this does not exclude more traditional histories. The problem reminds me of the typologies developed by Berlin and Dyson. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin distinguished two types of intellectuals: hedgehogs, who know a lot about one thing, and foxes, who know many different things. [3] In another, similar, metaphor, the mathematician and physicist Freeman Dyson saw two types of scholars: birds and frogs. [4] Frogs are similar to hedgehogs (they go into depth and try to solve one problem), while birds see the panorama and find connections between elements far removed from each other. Frogs dig into the rise and fall of political parties in Poland. Birds connect them with developments in other countries or other subdisciplines of history. We need many animals in the large, open garden of history. There is room for everybody. Let us welcome many different takes on our profession.

PKJ: Let me follow up on this metaphor and ask you if there is any king of frogs, that one discipline that would wear the crown? And, if I may, I would like to ask, who would you be in this animal garden?

ADB: Political history has been considered the queen of history for a long time. Until 1945, the main areas of historical research were political, diplomatic, and military history. This type of supremacist thinking has disappeared, and it is a major achievement of the *Annales* school and other more recent schools. In my picture of our garden, there is no place for kings or queens, even frog kings or bee queens.

Personally, I would love to be a bird, but I think that I am a hybrid. By training, I have a strong empirical inclination. As a frog, I work on cases and interpret them with particular theories. For example, I have built a model of resistance developed by historians persecuted by dictatorships. I founded it on a few hundred cases [and] on Charles Tilly's concept of repertoires of action. [5] But I am also a bird in the constant search for comparative material. And this is precisely why I struggle so much: if you start with cases, it may take years to see patterns, let alone extrapolate them toward the future. And in our scholarship, there is always a devil called the Law of Small Numbers. [6] Can we generalize from very limited numbers of cases? Many historians do this, but it is very tricky. Let me give an example. I try to identify all the historians in the world who have been murdered for political reasons. And then, people ask me, are these killings on the rise? For 2019, I detected four cases; for 2020, nine; for 2021, again four; and

for 2022, three. Detected! There may be cases yet unknown to me; and some detected cases may be false on closer scrutiny. If I am sincere, I cannot identify a trend from these scarce data. I am like the blind man in the parable: he touches the leg of an elephant without having a clue of the animal.

PKJ: The title of your latest book is *Crimes against History*. It is mostly about crimes against historians. Only toward the end do you touch on other attacks on history, such as threats against the freedom of expression of historians and against the concept of historical truth. Considering these crimes and attacks, is history in danger today, and is it more in danger than ever? Do you see some new threats emerging today?

ADB: History is under attack as much today as it was in previous decades and centuries, and it has certainly not decreased. Of course, we may suffer from a presentist bias because it is generally easier to collect cases of today than cases of the past. Even allowing for this effect, after almost half a century of collecting cases, I am convinced that it is increasing. It has become easier to attack history. Recently, therefore, I have created a new typology of attacks against history and divided it into attacks on historians as individuals and as community, on the one hand, and attacks on historical work (divided into attacks on historical information, on historical opinions, on historical truth, and on expressions of memory), on the other.

PKJ: In your book, you have added a chapter about fake news. Why did you decide to write it?

ADB: Consider that more and more threats against history are occurring online. Let me give one example: the denial of genocide. As we speak, it is a worldwide phenomenon. I call it an onslaught on the historical truth. It is proliferating, especially online. The United Nations General Assembly of the United Nations has approved its second resolution against Holocaust denial in early 2022. [7] Twenty years ago, it looked as if Holocaust denial was decreasing and that only a few weirdos still believed in it. This has completely changed with the rise of online activity. And not only that, if you try to refute it, then you are accused of disseminating false news. And that is a new phenomenon, I think, that the expertise of the professional historian is not as recognized as it was in the past. I recommend the beautiful book by the Princeton historian and philosopher of science Naomi Oreskes, *Why Trust Science?* [8] She explains how science works—how organized doubt is built into its inner core and how scholars try to develop methodologies to reduce doubt about their statements about reality, including past reality. Many people do not understand or recognize that anymore. They say that your opinion as a historian about the Holocaust is like any other. That crisis of expertise is a big problem because many people have forgotten or do not understand how difficult it is to draw plausible conclusions about the past from systematic historical reasoning. There are several other online threats that worry me. One is to publish the names of historians as suspects on watch lists or blacklists; another is doxing, which occurs when private information of historians is published with the purpose to intimidate them.

PKJ: We see a decrease in the belief in expertise or even the scientific status of historiography, a decrease in the belief that historians can influence contemporary politics, and a decline in the number of professional historians and history students. Are you concerned?

ADB: First of all, I firmly believe in the scientific character of history. Scientific history is characterized by a methodology reviewed by peers, and this drives us toward some degree of

objectivity. I understand objectivity as the attempt to describe the past according to shared rules of methodology, epistemology, heuristics, and so on without denying that historians also have a large margin of liberty in the composition and telling of their story. Our epistemological situation is doubly unique because we are part of the world we are describing, as human beings and sometimes as contemporaries, and because, strictly speaking, the past reality we are interested in does not exist anymore. I therefore believe in this system of firm methodology and peer control, and we should never abandon the claim of scientific history. I would even go so far as to say that there is unity in science on a very basic level. There are many differences between the humanities and the natural sciences, but there are also many similarities, and maybe we tend to overlook them: the biologist Edward Wilson spoke of consilience. [9] For example, I think that some mathematical theories, like the weak chaos theory, can be applied to some historical phenomena. And historical demography may teach a thing or two to evolutionary biology.

Only a few years ago, I was very pessimistic about the possibility of historical science. Why? When you look at the past from today's vantage point, you always know the outcome of past events, and this inevitably shapes your perspective. That implies that your views are *always* different from the views of contemporaries when their future was still open to them. This dreaded phenomenon, first studied in the 1970s by the psychologist Baruch Fischhoff and called the hindsight bias, was very challenging to me because it led me to believe that perhaps historical science is impossible in the end because of our outcome knowledge. [10] A classic example is the election of Donald Trump. Who could have predicted his success in 2016? Very few, but once he had won, many shouted, "I have always known that." They cannot imagine how wrong their judgment was before his electoral victory.

PKJ: Yes, another recent example is how we have retrospectively rationalized the Russian invasion of Ukraine. So how did you manage to overcome this challenge?

ADB: Since that bitter moment of introspection, I have reconciled myself with the thought that historical science is very imperfect due to the hindsight bias and other biases—imperfect but not impossible because the power of history is such that, if we master it critically, we can situate past, current, and future events into a larger timeframe and endow people with a sort of historical awareness. This in itself is an impressive achievement and the main reason why we should not kick out the possibility of historical science. But do we really advance in our field? There is a very famous dictum from the eighteenth century by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, [11] who once said, "God, if You hold absolute truth in Your right hand and the imperfect truth in Your left, and You say: choose, then I beg You, please give me Your left hand because absolute truth is only for Thee." [12] I also think that truth is the polar star in our profession. One may prefer synonyms for truth (such as reliable knowledge) because the concept of historical truth has bad press nowadays. I don't care [about] the synonyms; the problem will not go away. I believe in truth and our capacity to approximate it even if I also believe that absolute truth is out of reach and even suspect.

PKJ: I think this capacity to produce positive historical knowledge and falsify wrong historical knowledge is an assumption that makes history possible. Especially since the status of positive knowledge as truth has been challenged, I think we tend to put unhealthy emphasis on negative historical knowledge—on falsification.

ADB: This is also the tragic weakness of our critique of pseudohistory: we attack myths as distorted stories about the past, and this is a very important task of historians, but people also want to hear positive stories about the past from them. Therefore, criticism is not enough if we

want to give meaning to history. Meaningful history is more than just a collection of rebuked myths without alternatives.

PKJ: I think that the development of professional historiography in Europe during the nineteenth century was a seminal achievement, but the development of human rights in the twentieth century is even more crucial. Do you think human rights can serve as a standard vantage point for all modern historical narrations or even for humanism in general?

ADB: I see human rights as an enriched form of humanism. We cannot escape the anthropocentrism of humanism, but we can be on our guard for it. In adopting an enriched humanism, we also reckon with the planet, the environment, and other sentient beings. It is an inclusive conception of humanism. Under this condition, I can agree that it may be a reasonable basis for the future and probably the best we have. I am currently working to answer the question: What exactly is a human rights view of the past? [\[13\]](#)

The Network of Concerned Historians has a new section on history-related resolutions adopted by the United Nations General Assembly from its beginning in 1946 until today. [\[14\]](#) Many of these resolutions are well crafted and farsighted. I still believe that the enriched humanism represented in human rights is humanity's best idea and has to be our way forward. It has its flaws, you can criticize it as mere talk or even nonsense, but what solid alternatives do we have? Honestly, I look around me a lot and I do not see serious competition. Human rights is an ideology, but it is a rational one and not utopian but realistic: it does not promise paradise—as most other ideologies—but tries to lessen suffering.

PKJ: Don't you think humanity missed that chance to put everyone under the same umbrella of basic norms and universal human rights? Because of the rise of new nationalism, we start to differentiate again: our suffering, the suffering close to home, and the suffering far away.

ADB: Yes, it is a big problem—fragmentation. But we should distinguish political from scientific fragmentation. In the political domain, we have more and more authoritarian actors today, like Putin in Russia or Xi in China, and they are trying to create their own alternative worlds governed by their own set of standards. They drift away from the common destiny of the planet, and this is a dangerous development. Immanuel Kant may have seen the solution: human beings are bellicose by nature, he thought, but if perceived with enlightened self-interest, precisely this bellicose nature can mobilize the will to create platforms of understanding and eventually trigger lasting peace. But this presupposes a common ground, and I believe that human rights alone can provide this. Fragmentation is also very much alive in the historical profession, but there it is partly necessary. It welcomes the frogs, but we also need birds, even if there is no eagle who can see it all.

PKJ: I wanted to ask you about the concept of a global community of historians. In the foreword to your book *Responsible History*, Jürgen Kocka referred to the work of Carl Erdmann, *Toward a Global Community of Historians*. [\[15\]](#) He wrote it before the collapse of the USSR. Do you think we have moved toward this goal, or have we become more and more fragmented?

ADB: Fragmentation is one tendency. The other tendency, toward a world community of historians, has been embodied by the International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS)

since 1926. Like fragmentation, unification has increased. The trend toward cooperation is less strong than it should and could be, and, therefore, ICHS is very necessary in my opinion. After one century of existence, though, it still struggles to have representatives from the global South. As we speak, dozens of historians are being persecuted in China, Myanmar, or Belarus. ICHS should at least formally condemn these persecutions. I firmly believe that we should stand up for our colleagues.

PKJ: It has been some time since you have developed the notion of responsible history based on professional duties. Would you amend something today?

ADB: I think that historians have some core duties. I have built the concept of responsible history around two such duties: accuracy and sincerity. There are many virtues, but I think some virtues have a higher status, the status of duties. Enforceable duties set floors; scholarly virtues set best practices. Accuracy and sincerity are absolutely necessary if history is to survive, and they are therefore virtues with a higher status. Other virtues, such as open-mindedness, curiosity, and so on, are welcomed but not as essential. You can only be a responsible historian if you are accurate and sincere. Cicero emphasized this already, and it will be a characteristic of the historian of the third millennium as well.

PKJ: Do you think we should put more emphasis on the ethical aspect of our profession?

ADB: I think we should be more aware of where we stand. In this, I distinguish the ethics of history from the ethics of the historical profession. These are different things to me. The ethics of history deal with moral judgments about historical figures and with our relationship with the dead. In contrast, the ethics of historians is an umbrella term for the ethical conduct of historians: when historians act, they are protected by rights, limited by duties, and guided by virtues.

PKJ: Can you give me your stance on the professional codes of ethics and on increasing cases of attempts to fix historical facts and opinions in national courts? Should we welcome it or be skeptical about it?

ADB: I do not welcome trials about history and trials against historians. It is others who sue us in court, for example, because we supposedly defamed their ancestors. So, it is not our choice. Court judgments, however, can be very instructive to learn how third parties, including judges, look at us. One of the collections of the Network of Concerned Historians gathers history-related court judgments. We have 760 cases now in 77 countries worldwide. Of course, many of the trials against historians are tools of intimidation. Defamation cases, for example, are often disguised forms of censorship. How do codes of ethics fit into this reasoning? There is a stiffened attitude in our profession that ethical codes tend to freeze the profession and are repression-oriented, whereas the roles of these codes as tools of education and prevention, as catalysts for debate about basic principles, as long-term strategies to counter abuses, and as instruments to demonstrate historians' professionalism to the outside world, including plaintiffs and judges, are neglected. *Sagesse oblige*, wisdom obligates, as the Swiss philosopher André Mercier said. [\[16\]](#)

[1] Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007).

[2] In the second edition of the book (updated with footnotes), Taleb actually notes that the notion of the “Black Swan,” although attributed to Hume, Mill, or Popper, was mentioned for the first time in known form by the Roman poet Juvenal (*Satires*, VI, 161–83). This is probably a variation of an older concept of a “rare bird.” See Taleb’s prologue to *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 2010), xxxi (in the unnumbered note at the bottom of the page).

[3] Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History*, 2nd ed., ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[4] Freeman Dyson, “Birds and Frogs,” *Notices of the AMS* 56, no. 2 (2009), 212–23.

[5] See Charles Tilly, “Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758–1834,” *Social Science History* 17, no. 2 (1993), 253–80.

[6] See, for example, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Belief in the Law of Small Numbers,” *Psychological Bulletin* 76, no. 2 (1971), 105–10.

[7] Resolution A/76/L.30 was adopted on 13 January 2022. The full text is available here: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/N22/230/12/PDF/N2223012.pdf?OpenElement>.

[8] Naomi Oreskes, *Why Trust Science?*, ed. Stephen Macedo (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[9] Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

[10] Baruch Fischhoff, “Hindsight ≠ Foresight: The Effect of Outcome Knowledge on Judgment Under Uncertainty,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 1, no. 3 (1975), 288–99.

[11] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) was an influential German intellectual in the eighteenth century.

[12] This is a very good paraphrase by De Baets. The more typical English translation reads: “If God held all truth shut in his right hand, and in his left hand nothing but the ever-restless instinct for truth, though with the condition of for ever and ever erring, and should say to me, Choose! I would bow reverently to his left hand, and say, Father, give! Pure truth is for Thee alone!” (Kuno Fisher, “Sketch of Lessing,” in *Nathan the Wise*, by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, transl. Ellen Frothingham [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1868], v).

[13] De Baets presented a paper titled “A Human Rights View of the Past” during the meeting of the International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography on 25 August 2022 in Poznań.

[14] “United Nations General Assembly Resolutions Related to History (1946–2023),” Network of Concerned Historians, accessed 7 May 2023, <https://www.concernedhistorians.org/content/re.html>.

[15] Jürgen Kocka, foreword to *Responsible History*, by Antoon De Baets (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), xii.

[16] André Mercier (1913–1999) was a Swiss theoretical physicist and philosopher. See also De Baets, *Responsible History*, 188.



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