



THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE HISTORY AND THEORY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

ICHTH Newsletter | No. 4, October 2024

WELCOME ADDRESS



By

Antoon De Baets
President of the ICHTH

MY LITTLE HISTORY CRISIS

I began walking the path of history in 1973 and for decades I had unwavering confidence in the importance of the historical sciences. That is, until 2017, when prompted by the writings of Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Daniel Kahneman, and others, I decided to devote a class to biases in historical writing. In preparation, I delved into my notes on anachronism kept since my student days. Anachronism is a distorting form of retrospection characterized by the impermissible transfer of contemporary objects, concepts, or values to the past. When objects are transferred, anachronism is obvious, but when concepts and values of the present are projected onto the past, things become a little bit more complicated.

I also started reading about the hindsight bias – the influence that knowledge of the outcome of a past situation exerts on a present judgment about that situation. When people act, they usually have several options at their disposal. But normally, historians only see the actual conduct – the outcome – and not the options from which that conduct was chosen. Knowledge of the outcome blocks our understanding of the submerged possibilities and the role of chance that determined the conduct of historical figures. The hindsight bias does not illuminate the past but obscures it.

These insights reignited my much older doubts about the conception of historical truth. Sure, historical truth should be based on the most rigorous conditions of sincerity and accuracy, but we should not remain blind for substantial extra-epistemic influences on its construction. For one, historians are story-tellers. And because they adore telling stories, they start seeing patterns everywhere. More than there really were. This inclination makes our stories fascinating, but does it make them also true? My faith in the value of historical science vanished. The past slipped through my fingers ... if I ever held it. I had phantom pains.

A little later, I also lost my belief in the much touted lessons of history. I realized that two almost opposite obstacles undermine the possibility to learn from the past: the Lucas critique and the prevention paradox. The first – also called the theory of rational expectations – is a critique of macroeconomic policy named after Nobel prize laureate Robert Lucas who was trained as a historian. If we were rational, the argument goes, we would seek to reduce the impact of negative historical events (such as war). And if we did that long enough, these events would diminish and eventually peter out: The lessons would have a self-canceling effect, meaning that historical information would become useless for predicting the future. However, because many

of these negative historical events continue to occur, we must conclude that we are less rational than expected and do not learn (much) from them.

The prevention paradox, in contrast, assumes that it *is* possible to draw lessons from the past. But paradoxically, if lessons from the past effectively prevent negative events, the crimes and suffering thus prevented become untraceable. If suffering decreases, how can one then prove that this was the result of such lessons learned in the first place? If the mission is to avoid and prevent the mistakes of the past, positive results often become untraceable, with the risk of skewing the balance negatively. But absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

As the years ticked by, I reconciled myself with the existence of strong biases in the field of history. Sadder and (perhaps) wiser, I now believe that if we stay alert and astute enough, we can temper them to a more or less bearable degree. But the highest that historians, stripped of hubris, can hope for is a humble version of the past.

Yet I believe that the greatest potential contribution of history – and by extension of historiography and philosophy of history – to society lies elsewhere. Our humble but tested versions of history – and our sustained reflection on them – can help create a responsible historical awareness in wider circles. They can kindle the collective ability to locate current events in a sound long-term perspective.

Astronomer Royal Martin Rees wrote that the Earth has a lifespan of nine billion years. Roughly speaking, we are now halfway. So we do well to roll up our sleeves. To survive, the planet needs every available brain, also in the field of history. As Roman Krznaric wrote, we should learn how to become good ancestors. I hope that the mission of our Commission – all proportions taken into account – fits somehow into that megaproject. If it does not, what is it worth? It's as in that old joke. From within the forest, two beavers are looking at a vast hydro-electric dam afar. Says one beaver to the other: "I didn't actually build it, but it's based on my idea." I wished that we could be these beavers from time to time.

COMMISSION NEWS

- Our Commission has had a **Constitution** since 2017. It can be consulted at <https://www.ichth.net/constitution>. On 22 February 2024, the ICHTH Board decided that the text of a new Constitution will be put on the agenda of the next ICHTH General Assembly for a vote on approval with its unanimous recommendation. In the meantime, the President welcomes comments from ICHTH members on the new texts, which you can find here: <https://www.ichth.net/archive/31.pdf>. Please send your comments to antoondebaets@ichth.net.
- All ICHTH members can nominate **candidates** for our Commission. The procedure is very simple and involves filling out a small nomination form that can be found at <https://www.ichth.net/membership>. Alternatively, candidates can also apply for membership themselves. A small application form can be found at <https://www.ichth.net/membership> as well. At regular intervals, the ICHTH Board evaluates all nominations and applications and invites those approved for membership.
- The ICHTH website has a page with **links**: <https://www.ichth.net/links>. The page includes links to international networks, collective works, journals, blogs, and book series in our field. For practical reasons, the page excludes links to works of individual authors or initiatives of merely national scope, but please send any other suggestions to info@ichth.net.