

**THE FUTURE OF THE PAST – WHEN WILL IT
BECOME HISTORY?**

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By *Douglas James*
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When, in the 'sixties and 'seventies, the 'deconstructionists' were busy blowing up conceptual bridges, history neither escaped attention nor survived intact. So violent were the explosions that many of history's fundamental concepts were uprooted and tossed sky-high. For some, this blew fresh air through a stagnant subject. Others, meanwhile, have been suffocated by the dust or crushed by the debris. The aftershock is still affecting history today, both by what is studied, and by how it is studied.

I hope in this piece to address some issues raised by 'deconstruction'. To what end? Briefly, I propose an amicable divorce of history from the present (the marriage is not destined to fail), and a settlement imposed on any continued dalliance of history with social prophesy.

Deconstruction sought no less a target than the Western philosophical tradition. Part of its attack focussed on the dichotomous nature of Western thought, that is, the dominance of thinking in binaries – life and death, for example. That underpinning the concept of time might be past and future. Deconstructionists held that these binaries, although stable, were greatly imbalanced. If we imagine a swing, where one seat is heavier and permanently grounded, this would depict the concept which people conceived of more easily and more closely. So, life is better understood and perceived than death, and we tend to think of things more readily in terms of their life rather than their death. At the opposite end of the swing, the more lightly conceived partner concept of the binary is high in the sky, further from comprehension. Applied to time, the past is 'dominant': the past, to continue the swing analogy, is grounded, whilst the future seems higher, ethereal, mystical. Western thought, therefore, was naturally refracted through an historical prism, rather than a prophetic one. Perhaps this is why horoscopes are still relegated to the back pages of newspapers.

It was contended that by redressing the 'asymmetry' of binaries, new concepts would emerge, as though another prism were placed within the existing one and the light of Western thoughts scattered anew. Time would have to be reconfigured and history rewritten. The synthesis, so to speak, would be the present, the new primary basis of thought and

experience: the key, indeed, as George Orwell suggests in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to the control of time.

One very noticeable consequence of deconstructionist – and more general post-modern – evaluations was indeed the emergence of the 'present' as a presence (excuse the conflation) in historical study. Roland Barthes, the French linguist, typifies the theory. The binary in question is that of reading and writing. In his seminal analysis of a little Balzac story, *S/Z*, he argues that the reading of something is actually a productive activity, for the mind *actively* interprets different 'codes' within a text. Replacing what meaning is supposed to be represented by reading, meanings are themselves *created* at the point of reading. Readers' variable interpretations of the codes disturb the traditional binary classification, and shatter the classification into as many parts as there are readers. (Aligned to this, a sister principle goes that representations are but ruses, possessing misleading 'reality effects', for they merely connote, or 'signify', reality and cannot denote it; readers, being the only ones who can make something 'signified', are the ones who ultimately bestow meaning upon something.) Barthes clarifies all this with a confusing but acute metaphor, underscoring his dissatisfaction with – or conquest of – the existing binary: that reading is 'writerly'.

History under this scheme becomes infinitely plural, as people process experiences – and thereby make them signified, make meaningful... – with infinite variety. So, for example, the 'facts' of the Holocaust and their significance are reformulated and recomposed at each different moment of contemplation. Facts and meanings are in constant evolution. A phrase of George Santayana's puts it nicely (and it need not be taken derogatorily): that 'things actual and substantial dissolve into things relative and transitional'. Given this stress on the formulation of facts and meanings, the present, where such perpetual fluctuation is to be located – where it occurs, if we will – becomes crucial.

But instead of such a clear synthesis, the lotus of history now grows in muddier historiographical waters. For, supplementing the past's (dare I say) commonsensical place in history, none of such approaches as Whiggish teleology has withered. Each has found, in guise if necessary, its adherents. And deconstruction simply increased the size of the historiographical pond. Fundamentally, the practice of history has largely continued as before: whilst historians vary in outlook and purpose, most subscribe to assiduous analysis of sources, a little imaginative reconstruction if necessary, spicy writing if possible.

What, then, is awry? What is of *harm* to history? Can not we just admire the flower above the bleak water? After all, in the same way that history is, as I described it above, commonsensically about the past, so it seems commonsensical that people should think differently about things (and that they should continue do so presently). A little forward thinking never hurt anyone, either. So, indeed, does it seem patent that historians should never have tried to erect some temple in the sky named History, at whose gates they worship, and to expect all to follow in obedient devotion. Indeed, it is not my purpose here to take issue with the theory itself: the present seems as good a time as any for history to be made and thought about, and, 'life' being assumed the stuff of history, answers to Seneca's question, 'If we do not live now, then when?', still should give the unneeded justification to those who do.

As with most theories, problems arise in their distortions. And I have tried to explain the theory in order to show how it has been diverted from. The problems I wish to treat of here are two, mentioned in passing at the beginning. The first, the most serious, is the massive boom in recent times of what has become known – logically enough – as the 'history of the present'. This is history in real time, on the heel of events, embroiled in them. The second is prophesy, mainly of the social kind (few historians care about the planets, or the horses).

The first problem I shall sketch with a few examples. They show how the past is not being made *in* the present, but how the past is becoming the present *itself*. (If it be argued that the past is the very present *creation* or *conception* of the past, then it follows that we can talk of such things as cups of tea *being* the motion of a kettle – or tea-pot – pouring water or of a holiday *being* the thinking about a beach; which seem a little far-fetched.)

A mere ten days after Tony Blair resigned office, Alastair Campbell's eagerly anticipated diaries of *The Blair Years* were published. It was generally held by commentators that they would have a two-fold worth: that they would allow us to burrow into the silly depths of the Blair-Brown feud (clever how that has been made *ancient* history!); and that they would offer historians a wealthy mine of anecdotes regarding crucial policies undertaken in Mr. Blair's decade, with which one could judge the significance of his premiership.

One of the main endeavours of the past decade is the prosecution of war in Iraq. Just like Vietnam, this is a long-drawn-out affair, and though troops have formally withdrawn from central Basra, British involvement has not ceased. Now it is only recently that some conclusions about the American involvement in Vietnam are being drawn. And yet, already – and this is of course by no means exhaustive, nor incontrovertibly reliable, if even illustrative – a

glance to Amazon yields 1,593 book length studies of the 'Iraq war' (and, for the record at 20 August, 62 DVDs, 2 VHSs, 3 items for 'Kitchen and Home', 1 'Toys and Games').

Do not both brief examples tell us something about what constitutes history nowadays? They certainly show that fewer and fewer sinews connect past with present. What is happening still is being recorded as having happened: current affairs are history, long live current affairs! Yet, the Iraq war is, in some books, by no means being presented as current (though this is why it is a subject matter of such popularity); rather, it is being strained for its (historical) significance, what it means and *has meant* already to people, its impact, its legacy. With Blair, too, all the talk of his sunset period was of legacy and of what he *has meant* for Britain. It is not blithe to say that to those of us awaiting tuition fee bills, Blair still *means* a great deal.

The presentation of events is done all the time, and has been done since time immemorial. However, when the historian's job is to proffer an explanation of the narrative(s) of the Iraq war or Mr. Blair's decade, he runs the risk of being stuck too close behind the tanks to see what is going on, or deafened by individual bullet fire such that he cannot hear the bigger bombs.

With time distorted as in a Dalí painting and with the present having become acceptable material for history, the meritorious virtue of reflection has been overlooked. It is a though historians, in their effort to catch up with events, are floor-painters, painting so frantically that they unknowingly paint into a corner and that, when wanting to inspect their work from the doorway, cannot help but smudge over and dirty it. When the act of explanation becomes temporally enmeshed in what is to be explained, both are distorted: we cannot separate events from the 'event' that is documenting it, raising thereby the dangers of pronouncing vacuously that events are self-evidently significant or of spending so long attempting to disclaim against confusion as to pronounce nothing. The results, either way, can be either messy, or, worse, empty.

Yet, with simple patience and dispassion (which latter, despite vehement beliefs to the contrary, does not preclude empathy or interest), we can avoid mistakes of hasty judgement and the elision of important discoveries, which plague the effort to be contemporary with events. It ought to be the disengagement which permits of engagement.

There is one way of rendering oneself disengaged, but it involves a little deception. This is the second problem, of prophesy. As I mentioned

earlier, historians have before been accused of the charge of social prophesy. This was to some degree a crime committed *en bonne foi*, when history felt a deep socio-moral duty to warn of future peril by past lesson. Given that the burden of social protection no longer weighs upon history to the same extent, we need to ascertain whether the crime is indeed now a crime, whether *en mauvaise foi*, whether committed.

I would assert that it is a crime when the expressed purpose of the author is not to prophesise. A social scientist writing about the future of vandalism would be obviously acquitted, given that a degree of social prophesy is required to frame the study (though I'm sure we might prefer it if he took actual statistics of past vandalism, proffered an explanation, and discussed the likelihood of the prevalence of explanatory factors; we might even make this a condition of the acquittal). In this sense, it is harmless, for no other purpose suffers for it. However, prophesy in the setting of history harms by necessarily sacrificing the object of the study. It damages firstly by being ulterior and secondly by obscuring what is being written about. If a Marxist historian will study the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century to show how a revolution, or the next stage of it, is imminent, we might rightly suggest a conflict of intellectual interest. Further, it is in bad faith because historians know that history is no longer society's righteous teacher – or its exclusive moral philosopher – but cling to the shibboleth of feeling it ought to be (a symptom of the temple-in-the-sky business).

Committed, then? It is, inadvertently but almost inevitably in the mechanics of presentist practice, I should say. Those who wish to avoid hindering their sight by their proximity to events run the risk of artificially projecting their vision into the future, so as to be able to refer back historically. A 'mapping' of the present insidiously requires the future to *have happened*, which then clarifies what the course of present events *is*, and validates its discussion. The future becomes the present's past, and pasts are fine to talk about! Naturally, describing the 'past' of the future necessitates the language of the past. Such writings – Proust's work is the fictional example *par excellence* – constantly allude to resolution, that there *will have been* a series of events to recount and explain. They are restrained from actual resolution only because what they are attempting to resolve has not actually finished – it has as yet no end. But pseudo-resolution is always possible, simply by fixing the present as one's 'end'-point in time and not taking into account whether events actually stray beyond it.

Logically extended, in this process, the past, or pasts, may be dispensed with altogether. It is a bit like the historical equivalent of a simplified Markov principle in mathematics, where, given the present, the future is independent from the past. Taking the present

as the past, and requiring the future to have happened, can actually result in one's abandoning any sense of past at all. Instead of the present being a substitute for a binary of thought, it can actually eradicate what it attempts to subsume. Deconstruction has let loose an historical free-for-all, and it is graver than the common 'anything goes' complaints. It has released something splendid and something beyond control, like a diamond-tipped spear hurled by an inexperienced recruit, whistling on an unknown path. As it has freed history from the chains of singular time and vision, it has bound it to new problems of plurality and immediacy.

To be sure, not everyone is in danger of impalement by this spear (the luckier they!). Those not reading history might be as well to admire the gleam of those diamonds. Yet, is it unfair to presume that some of these problems are not solely of history's affliction, and any cure may be not solely to history's welfare?

The problem of perspective is classic, and, I might venture, common to many disciplines. Now perspective is not a tool, nor still an obstacle, but rather a governing characteristic; it comprehends context, materials, vantage. It is not that some have it and others do not. Generally speaking of course, it refers to the distance, how far removed, from the subject one is. The brief argument I put forward in favour of perspective – in this sense – is deeply unsatisfying. Disengagement sounds like a rite of passage, which it is not. The argument is left defenceless against the question: 'Well, how long must you leave an event before it becomes permissible to study it?' Fifty years – that's the statutory rule? We could regress infinitely and tiresomely.

Indeed, one cannot set an arbitrary time after which one is allowed to study something, because all events are different and differently consequential. Significance never becomes clearer after a uniform time. Rarely, however, in terms of what people actually study, is significance revealed immediately such that the present is an adequate time to study it. Nor can there be a *need* to ascertain the significance of something happening currently that is commensurate with the harm that even an *attempt* to elucidate that significance can do. For improper treatments can lead to prejudices, misinformation, and all sorts of dangers that we are constantly, and for our betterment, told to guard against.

Things must be balanced. This is better done after time, away from the imbroglio of current affairs. Historians and writers always talk lovingly of Clio, the Muse, to whom so many dedicate themselves. I would rather talk of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory, and ask her to give us the

courage not to feel the need to capture everything as it happens, or prescribe everything as it will. We need not wait for things to become mysterious or decayed before we summon her; but it is urgent that we ask her to safeguard time's stories so that we might approach and respond to them with sensitivity, care and respect as and when they reveal themselves more fully over time.

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