

Historians and the politics of memory

Jay Winter

“Now in some affairs which affect the interests of the Commonwealth, we require a certain mechanism whereby some members of the Commonwealth must behave purely passively, so that they may, by an artificial common agreement, be employed by the Government for public ends (or at least deterred from vitiating them). It is, of course, impermissible to argue in such cases; obedience is imperative. But in so far as this or that individual who acts as part of the machine also considers himself as a member of a complete commonwealth or even of cosmopolitan society, and thence as a man of learning who may through his writings address a public in the truest sense of the word, he may indeed argue without harming the affairs in which he is employed for some of the time in a passive capacity.” (Kant, *What is Enlightenment?*, 1784)

Let me engage in a thought experiment. Had I been French (which I am not) and a professor of history (which I am), and had I been approached by any one of three petitions protesting the action of the legislature in declaring an interest in the positive presentation of colonialism, would I have signed any one of them?

My answer is no. These remarks explore the reasons for such a refusal, which I hope touch on the political context of what we do as historians.

In his famous essay of 1784, *What is Enlightenment?*, Kant makes a clear distinction between the public and private uses of reason. Reversing the usual usage of the terms, Kant says that when men accept that they are servants of the State, they act in a “private” capacity; but as pure intellectuals, they speak to the public of knowledge, and act in a “public” manner. It is clear which form of reason Kant thought suited public order, and which sort suited the cosmopolitan world of learning. Do the two always collide?

Perhaps not, but the collisions are more frequent and more likely when historians are public servants. In Germany and France, that is their status. In the United States, it is not. The United Kingdom is somewhere between the two. In all cases historians engage in the study and questioning of the category of national identity. It should hardly be surprising, therefore, that politicians interested in protecting or advancing their own ideas about national identity should try to persuade scholars of the merits of their own ideas about Frenchness, or Britishness, Germanness or Americanness. And given the status of French historians as *fonctionnaires*, their role as teachers in producing the next generation of citizens has been a matter of public concern for well over a century.

The key distinction here is between persuasion and injunction. Legislators have no right to demand a particular interpretation of the past from paid civil servants, but they have reason to fear the independence of the academy in general, and of historians in particular. In my view, the best response to such legislative instructions is to ignore them completely. They have no logic behind them; they have no force; they have no significance in the context of what Kant termed the scholarly “public in the true sense of the world”, namely the profession itself. But we should hardly be surprised that they try to constrain the world of scholarship; they are “public servants” too, and treat us no differently than we treat them.

Let us consider the celebrated, and now repealed injunction to teach the history of colonialism in a particular way. Clause 4 of the measure urged teachers and textbook writers to “acknowledge and recognize in particular the positive role of the French presence abroad, especially in North Africa”. On the face of it, this injunction is absurd. The study of history is based on critical examination of sources; having a pre-ordained interpretation of the past negates the purpose of history and makes its practice a travesty of reason. Students must be taught how to reason for themselves, how to dare to think, in Kant’s language, and to follow the evidence wherever it leads. Thus a law on how to write history is roughly equivalent to law-enjoining biologists to teach creationism as opposed to Darwinian science. It turns reason into its opposite, thereby making a travesty of education itself. To be sure, legislatures are filled with people who would not know reason if they were to bump into it on the street, and who therefore care not one bit about making statements which reduce education and scholarship to pure genuflection.

But what do we say when legislatures act in a manner which rules certain interpretations of the past, stated in public, as criminal, and subject to criminal prosecution? Holocaust denial is a crime in Austria; that is why David Irving, the notorious British scholar whose reputation was reduced to ashes in a trial he brought for libel in London in 1998, was incarcerated in 2006, adding further insult to injury already self-inflicted. Can the propagation of ideas, including Irving’s, be deemed criminal? If so, then legislatures can determine the boundary conditions of historical interpretation, outside of which scholars cannot roam with impunity. A legislative injunction declaring that genocide was perpetrated on the Armenian people during the Great War carries the same hortatory purpose as the measure urging a rosy view of colonialism. Either both are repugnant, or both are measures of free speech.

I prefer to put them all in the category of free speech, and to treat both David Irving’s Holocaust denial and legislative legitimations of the Armenian genocide in the same way we listen to most political uttering - as statements with no relevance to what scholars and teachers of history do.

In France, there is an additional problem, which makes these statements flashpoints of conflict. In France the linkage between history and memory has been resisted by historians of all political persuasions. I believe this is a mistaken position. To be sure, memory is the stuff out of which political identities emerge; memory nurses grievances among disgruntled minorities, or among the victims of real offenses. Historians try to see

through the evidence of memory to a narrative based on documents of all kinds, including the statements of those who survived particular events in the past. Hence history can never be equivalent to memory. But neither are history and memory totally divorced, each in majestic isolation on its separate peak, as Nora and Ricœur among others affirm. Historians choose subjects frequently for subjective reasons; something in their lives or past or temperament makes them embark on a project. Value-free social science does not enter until the choice of subject is made. Then and only then do the rules of evidence and contradiction apply.

I prefer to term the creative space in between history and memory “historical remembrance”. Here is a practice, which is burgeoning all over the world, and without producing dictatorial or tendentious scholarship. Like liturgical remembrance and family remembrance, historical remembrance reconstructs the past, but it does so in a manner which recognizes the hold that affect has on memory and on history alike. Historians of the Great War argue about evidence, but they bring to the argument emotion derived both from personal, familial, and from collective remembrance. The title of the First World War museum at Péronne, the Historial de la Grande Guerre, which I helped to found, makes this point emphatically. It is half way between history and a memorial, and in urging visitors to think about war and how we imagine it; we are engaging both in academic and in public debate about an issue of the highest importance. History without memory is impossible. It is incapable of engaging the public; memory without history is incapable of escaping from myths about the past. That is why the space between the two is so alive these days, and why historians must not presume to occupy a position *au-dessus de la mêlée*. We are in the *mêlée*, not out of it. We bring affect and memory to our work, though it is always subject to the rules of evidence and the need to disconfirm hypotheses if the documents say so.

And since we cannot escape into the realm of pure reason, then we need to consider the force of Kant’s simple injunction. Our position vis-à-vis the State matters when we teach. We need to take account of the sensibilities of our students and of the families and communities in which they live. But the sensibilities of our professional colleagues deserve no such respect. We need to write history whatever our colleagues feel about it. We need to write history whatever legislators say about it.

Instead of protesting political interference, we need to recognize it as inevitable and ignore it. We then can concentrate at the task at hand, which is the art of using documents of all kinds to stop people, some in power, some not, from lying about the past.

L’auteur

Jay Winter est professeur d’histoire contemporaine à l’université de Yale depuis 2001, après avoir enseigné à Jérusalem, Warwick, Cambridge et New York (Columbia). Grand spécialiste américain de la Première guerre mondiale, il l’a étudiée dans une douzaine d’ouvrages, et contribué à une trentaine d’ouvrages collectifs, d’abord sous un angle politique (et britannique), puis social et

culturel, ce qui l'a conduit à se pencher sur son ombre dans l'histoire du XX^e siècle. Cofondateur du Mémorial de Péronne, il a publié en 2004 avec Antoine Prost dans la collection « Points histoire », au Seuil, un essai historiographique essentiel : *Penser la grande guerre*.

Résumé

Jay Winter n'aurait signé aucune des trois pétitions d'historiens contre l'article 4 de la loi sur la colonisation. Il trouve absurdes par principe toutes les lois mémorielles, sans trouver illogique ni même illégitime que les politiques cherchent à utiliser les professeurs pour diffuser leurs conceptions de l'identité nationale. Il recommande aux professeurs et aux intellectuels d'ignorer de telles injonctions, mais de tenir compte des sensibilités des communautés auxquelles ils appartiennent.

Mots clés

Pétitions d'historiens ; lois mémorielles ; identité nationale.

Abstract

Jay Winter would not have signed any of the Historians petitions against the fourth article of the French colonization law. He thinks all the memory laws are absurd, but that it is quite legitimate and logical that the politicians want to use professors to diffuse their conception of national identity. He wishes professors and intellectuals to ignore such injunctions, but to take care of the sensibilities of communities whom they belong.

Key words

Historians petitions ; memory laws ; national identity.