

'Historians shouldn't be political pundits'. Discuss.

Ostensibly, the work of the historian and politician should never mix. "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past"¹; history is manipulated, or outright falsified, to be employed as an insidious political weapon, Orwell starkly highlights. On the surface, history – a discipline which pursues objectivity - is sullied by a 'political pundit'; unquestioned prejudice renders history untrustworthy and less valuable, or at its worst, a justification for oppressive political regimes. However, through examining what it truly means to be "political" and a "pundit", exploring the notion of objectivity and the role of the historian, this essay will discuss how politics has always been inextricably tied to how we write and receive history. It will explore how through 'identity politics', or simply disparate world views, it can even be used to enrich historical study by re-writing the prevailing narratives – which are often hijacked by history's 'winners' - with more nuance.

In the modern age, "Political" is a loaded term. Its connotations in public discourse are usually distasteful, with implications of deception or a distortion of truth to further an agenda. Throughout his electoral campaign, Trump's "primary qualification was that he was not "a politician""². Culturally, this is revealing; current disillusionment with politics is so strong that politicians are actively positioning themselves as if outside of the political realm. An insult Trump incessantly employed to silence opponents (and evade scrutiny on derogatory comments) was "political correctness". The view that "politics" and "truth" are incompatible is so entrenched that to describe someone as correct, but only "politically", is a term of abuse. Another telling example is attitudes to gender politics. Being labelled a "feminazi" has been used to discredit women's arguments for gender equality since its creation in 1991, by the male university professor Thomas Hazlett. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of American Political Slang*, a "feminazi" refers to a "committed feminist or a strong-willed woman". Being *too* political, particularly for women challenging the patriarchy, is problematic. Indeed, the case in question exemplifies how often the issue doesn't lie in the mere act of expressing a political opinion, but in espousing a political identity that questions a prevailing narrative or power structure. Yet, the etymology of "politics", from the Greek 'affairs of the cities' reveals its true value. Being "political" is merely engaging in (and questioning) the power structures in which we exist, be they government, gender, economic or race (to name a few). As Aristotle postulated, we are unavoidably "political animals"³ and allowing room for other political opinions is crucial. Ziblatt and Levitsky discuss, a "denial of the legitimacy of political opponents" (which both Trump and Hazlett are doing here) is symptomatic of an imperilled democracy.⁴ Thus, if we examine the instruction of the question more closely in the current cultural context, the implication is that pursuing sectional interests is *always* at the expense

¹ (Orwell, 1949)

² (Weigel, 2016)

³ (Miller, 2017)

⁴ (Steven Levitsky, 2018) p23

of objectivity. In this vein, politically committed history isn't really history at all, but propaganda.

"Pundit" is another term worth unpacking. Superficially, it denotes an expert in a particular field who may be called upon to give opinions to the public. However, often it is used pejoratively or ironically. Some historians, the question implies, are not only acting from a subjective ideological position for ulterior motives, but don't even have the expertise they claim. Thus, the view that historians 'shouldn't be political pundits', assumes that it is not just possible for, but is also the duty of, the historian to remain detached from their work. So, having established what the instruction is truly asking of the historian, we should ask is this really possible? And if it isn't, what should be the role of the historian?

With the rise of postmodernism, history has faced an epistemological challenge. Some even went as far as claiming "Most history is guessing; the rest is prejudice".⁵ As Evans explores, "the question is not so much "What is History?" but "Is it possible to do history at all?"⁶ If we adopt the view the question implies, we encounter a challenge at every stage of history writing. If the first is to choose what to study, "personal character" seeps in simply through choosing to study one area rather than another.⁷ Germaine Greer, for example, who is first and foremost a feminist writer, was unsurprisingly drawn to women's history and in "The Obstacle Race" mines the depths of art history to challenge the trope that there weren't any 'great' female painters. What we choose to study is never neutral, and as with Greer, politics often acts as a gateway into history. Even the next stage, collecting evidence, has its ambiguities. We can, of course, refer to discrete and irrefutable data collection to chronicle *what* happened. Take a key moment in Industrial Britain, 1851. From the census we can gather the demographics; we know this is the first moment in human history that more people live and work in cities rather than in the countryside. What is a harder task, is constructing an accurate picture of what it was like to live through such seismic change. Humphrey Jennings' *Pandemonium* compiles eye-witness accounts of the Industrial Revolution, offering vivid but immensely varied opinions on the "rise of the machine"⁸. On the Great Exhibition of the same year, Thomas Carlyle speaks of a "monstrous place" whilst Lord Macaulay's diary depicts a "most gorgeous sight; vast; graceful; beyond the dreams of the Arabian romances".⁹ By the nature of history being a study of humans – who are never neutral observers - the narrative changes depending on whose voices of the past we elevate and which we choose to suppress. Thus, even the 'evidence' we collect is political.

⁵ (Durant, 1968)

⁶ (Evans, 1997)p3

⁷ (Evans, 1997)p230

⁸ (Jennings, 1987)

⁹ (Jennings, 1987)p257

Having established a historical narrative, the historian moves onto an even more nebulous stage, which is digging into the area of 'meaning' or 'significance', and what we use history for. This is perhaps the stage where both the writer and reader of history must approach with a critical eye. History curriculums are key examples of this, and can show 'political punditry' taken to the extreme. Under Nazi Germany, they assumed a form a sinister propaganda. For Hitler, the methods of teaching history were "a reform of particular importance"¹⁰ because if education was de-intellectualised it could be a method of instilling blind obedience into the children who would make his "A Thousand-Year-Reich". William Frick, Minister of the Interior, rejected the notion that objectivity had any place in history. Its purpose was to teach that "race and blood were central", "leadership determined the fate of peoples" and most revealingly, to encourage "hatred of Germany's enemies, the Jews".¹¹ Of course, here is an example of where this is not 'historical interpretation' but a blatant distortion of facts to create an exclusive national identity. As Dr Nora Berend puts it, "to claim a monopoly in interpreting the past to create an exclusive national identity is not an intellectual exercise, but an exercise in power"¹².

Undoubtedly, this is 'political punditry' taken to the extreme, but still today history curricula are ideological products of the government who sets them, often with strong nationalistic undertones. During Trump's presidency, he spoke of reintroducing a "patriotic education"¹³, in response to the "anti-American" *The New York Times'* 1619 Project, which explores American history from an African American viewpoint, establishing his own 1776 Commission. Leading historian James Grossman described the project as "not a work of history", but of "national propaganda" and "cynical politics".¹⁴ Whilst the debate around the American history curriculum reflects a hyper-partisan political atmosphere, in the UK we are not exempt from a politically tainted curriculum. Backed by Niall Ferguson and David Starkey, in 2013 Michael Gove devised a history curriculum focusing "narrowly and exclusively" on "our island story".¹⁵ Inevitably, a nationalistic and "centrally imposed"¹⁶ history curriculum – imbued with a sense of inevitable progress – only breeds narrow-mindedness and prevents us from questioning the present. Neither Gove's nor Trump's curriculum are examples of blatant mistruth, as was the case under Nazi Germany, but rather a censorship of history, a small corner seen from one world view.

Hence, at every stage of the process of writing and disseminating history, politics seeps in. Whilst we might reject the postmodernist claim that history is created by the historian, complete objectivity is a fallacy. As discussed, history *has* been weaponised for dangerous

¹⁰ (Hitler, 1925)page 22

¹¹ (Evans, 2005)p263

¹² (Berend, 2012)

¹³ (Wikipedia, 2022)

¹⁴ (Wikipedia, 2022)

¹⁵ (Boffey, 2013)

¹⁶ (Berend, 2012)

political ends, but this is not an inherent feature of the subject. If history retains “self-consciousness”¹⁷, and we “study the historian before [we] study the facts”¹⁸, it is still possible, and desirable, for historical narratives from political standpoints. Diverse political lenses help us to rescue the hidden lives of the past; women, the working class and racial and ethnic minorities to name a few. A constant process of interrogating the past advances our understanding of who we are and how we got here, it’s what makes history “an unending dialogue between the present and the past”.¹⁹

In a 2011 poll from readers of *History Today* magazine, E.P Thompson made the shortlist of “most important historians of the last 60 years”²⁰. His work was transformative, but if we were to measure him against the standard of the question, he would perform terribly. A proponent of socialist ideology and part of the *Communist Party Historians Group*²¹, he made it very clear that ideology informed his writing. In his preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson laid out his approach; “I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver, the “Utopian” artisan” from the condescension of posterity”. He redefined the concept of “class” as not static, but a dynamic relationship between economic groups that changes over time, paving the way for a whole new field of historical inquiry. His lifelong involvement with left-wing politics allowed him to rewrite the lives of industrial labourers not as “cogs in a capitalist machine” but “agents, reacting to the Industrial Revolution with collaboration and political action”.²² Likewise, Robert Roberts’ “socialist worldview”, gained from lived experience,²³ informs *The Classic Slum* and fills an important gap in the knowledge of everyday life in Edwardian slums. A motivation to write was to challenge the prevailing descriptions of working-class life in the period which “naturally lacked the factuality of the first-hand experience could give it; few historians are the sons of labourers”²⁴. With first-hand experience, he dispelled the myth that the working class were the potentially revolutionary underbelly of society and rejected the romanticised descriptions of communities like his. What made *The Classic Slum* a seminal text was the attitude that the history of communities like Roberts’ was something “to overcome and transform, not affirm and validate”²⁵.

Mary Beard, the “wickedly subversive”²⁶ professor and “Britain’s best-known classicist”²⁷, has used her expertise to get to the root of a deeply embedded cultural practise - the silencing

¹⁷ P226 (Evans, 1997)

¹⁸ P230 I (Evans, 1997)

¹⁹ p225 (Evans, 1997)

²⁰ (Today, 2011)

²¹ (Wikipedia, 2022)

²² (Anon., 2013)

²³ (Wikipedia, 2022)

²⁴ (Roberts, 1971)

²⁵ (Wikipedia, 2022)

²⁷ (Laity, 2007)

of female voices in the public sphere. She is first and foremost a Classicist, but her writing is clearly political, and *Woman and Power: A Manifesto*,²⁸ undoubtedly will take a place among the great feminist works. Through analysing Greek and Roman history, she traces back to how our concept of 'power' is inherently masculine, "we have no template for what a powerful woman looks like, except that she looks rather like a man"²⁹. From Penelope's silencing by her son who tells her "...speech will be the business of men"³⁰ in Homer's *The Odyssey*, to Queen Elizabeth's speech in which she assures her troops she has "the heart and stomach of a king"³¹, Beard "takes the long view, on the culturally awkward relationship between the voice of women and the public sphere". With this context, she sheds light on how the same cultural mechanisms are used in modern society. Take the 2016 US election - you see these classical images re-emerging; Caravaggio's head of Medusa was replicated on T-shirts among other Trump paraphernalia, this time the decapitated head was Hilary Clinton "given the Medusa treatment"³². Thus, here is a classicist who, adopting a feminist stance, has enriched our understanding of gender relations in the modern age.

David Olusoga, like Beard and Thompson, focuses on telling a truthful account of a group systematically written out of history, devoting much of his scholarship to rewriting 'Black Britishness' back into history. His work has become increasingly pertinent with the current political climate – in 2020 following the George Floyd protests in America, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* and *Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners* were rebroadcast, in which a main message was that "remembrance is a political act"³³. The political stance he takes – namely to challenge Britain's "comforting island story narrative"³⁴ with a truthful account of the impact of slavery and Empire, is imperative to a society still riddled with racism. He said, "knowing this history better" and "seeing oneself as part of a longer story, is one of the ways in which we keep trying to move forward".³⁵ Thus, Olusoga, alongside Beard, Roberts and Thompson, are key examples of historians who have used a political angle not to misrepresent in pursuit of personal interest, but to rewrite a more accurate history of forgotten groups, a crucial task if we are to address the social issues of the day.

In conclusion, to ask the historian to be apolitical is an impossible task, and not one there is value in pursuing. Of course, being 'political' exists on a continuum, and we should be wary of unsubstantiated claims, and of claims to monopolies on historical truth. Lurking behind these are often ulterior motives, usually the desire for power. This is not just a historical issue

²⁸ My own emphasis

²⁹ P54 (Beard, 2017)

³⁰ P3 (Beard, 2017)

³¹ P 22 (Beard, 2017)

³² P77 (Beard, 2017)

³³ (Ramaswamy, 2016)

³⁴ (Ghadiali, 2021)

³⁵ (Olusoga, 2016)

but a very current one; six months ago Putin published *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. In less than half a year, Russian troops had invaded the country.³⁶ However, if we are “scrupulous and self-critical”³⁷, politics – like any interdisciplinary study – can hugely enrich historical inquiry. Orwell warned of the manipulation of history to legitimise authoritarian regimes, but he also knew that “In our age there is no such thing as “keeping out of politics””.³⁸

³⁶ (Yekelchuk, 2022)

³⁷ (Evans, 1997)p252

³⁸ (Orwell, 2008)

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