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HISTORY, HUMANITY AND TRUTH

The Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities

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by Robert Conquest

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# I

I am deeply honored that you have chosen me to give the Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, and asked me to speak to so distinguished an audience.

This is not, I think, a suitable occasion for formal analytics. I propose, rather, to pursue certain trains of thought, and then come to some conclusions.

It does seem especially appropriate for the Jefferson Lecture to be delivered (not for the first time) by a historian. Jefferson himself urged that the education of the members of a modern democracy should be, as he put it, "chiefly historical." His reasoning was that history, "by apprising them of the past, will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men."

Jefferson and his colleagues were well read in the history of England, of Europe, of the ancient world -- in fact of the world as a whole insofar as it was

available to them; and, as can be seen in their writings and speeches, they assumed a similar knowledge or receptivity to such knowledge in the whole American political milieu.

As Jefferson says, they drew lessons from this rich and varied past. But they did not apply these automatically and uncritically to their own place and period. They sought perspective rather than infallible revelations. The Founding Fathers were, in Carl Bridenbaugh's words, "men of intellect, not intellectuals"; or as Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. puts it, "men of vision without being visionaries."

In many respects, while much more is now known, our citizenry is less well educated in historical matters than in Jefferson's time: certainly less than Jefferson would have wished. In part, no doubt, this is due to defects in the school system about which there seems to be general agreement. But it is also the case that history at the academic level is under a variety of pressures which tend to remove it from its status as one of the humanities without otherwise improving it. In part this may be perhaps because "intellectuals" and "visionaries" are still with us.

## II

History is not some past from which we are cut off. We are merely at its forward edge as it unrolls. And only if one is without historical feeling at all, can one think of the intellectual fads and fashions of one's own time as a "habitation for everlasting." We may feel that at last, unlike all previous generations, we have found certitude. They thought so too.

We should look at the broader problem: at the never-ending urge for systematizations as wholly explanatory in the field of the humanities. Eric Temple Bell, the mathematician, once wrote that

the consuming hunger of the uncritical mind for what it imagines to be certainty or finality impels it to feast upon shadows in the prevailing famine of substance.

We spoke of fads and fashions. Fanaticisms and factiousnesses too, unfortunately. The Soviet experience was, of course, a terrible example of what can happen when an idea gets out of hand.

### III

With us, feeling for the past is weaker and vaguer than it ought to be. But though the roots could do with some watering, they have not been cut. With the Russians the case was far worse. Not only were they submitted to a long and horrifying experience based on a false historical theory; they were also robbed of knowledge of the historical facts on which a society must subsist; and they felt it keenly.

This destruction came in two modes. First, a suppositious "class" scheme was imposed on every public fact: so that, for example, a wholly invented class of kulaks was created and real people were assigned to it, and then repressed by the million.

Then, in the 1930s, not mere distortion, but total falsification became the norm. The experiment had proved a disastrous failure, but this was not to be admitted. Two Soviet Unions henceforth existed -- one the reality of poverty, exploitation, terror, falsehood, sycophancy, the other the fantasy of posters, the media, demonstrations, splendid statistics, public enthusiasm. History became part of the fantasy, culminating in the thoroughly falsified 1939 Short Course

History of the Communist Party, which sold 40 million copies the world over--became, in fact, the bible of the world Communist movement.

At one level, everyone in the Soviet Union not battered into mindlessness felt the falsity: and this disjunction became stronger and stronger. Fifteen or twenty years ago, when one spoke with Soviet delegates here one began increasingly to notice a look of shame as they presented to Westerners what were not just lies, but obvious, contemptible and discreditable lies -- and this was an important factor in the moral and intellectual crisis which matched in its effects the material failure of the system. For while Russia was deprived of its history there remained a common longing for the truth -- not merely in the abstract, but centered on a deep desire to know the real circumstances of the forces which had destroyed relatives and friends.

Until a few years ago, this aching gap could only be filled by foreigners, writing in the West. This of course also involved the refuting of the Stalinist and sub-Stalinist myth which had penetrated our own countries.

It is difficult to make clear to the present generation how deeply it affected much of the Western intelligentsia. Not only its pervasiveness, but also

its virulence: as Orwell remarked, anyone expressing "mild distaste for slave labor camps or one-candidate elections" was often treated as "either insane or actuated by the worst of motives." As he says, "anti-Communist" was usually preceded by "rabid."

There were many reasons for these Western delusions about the USSR: the ideological pull of the idea of state socialism, the anti-Western bias within an alienated intelligentsia which could see nothing but good in its enemy and opposite. For them genuine knowledge of the Soviet Union had vanished; emptied of reality the country appeared, as in those old maps of America and Africa, as the home of mythical beasts -- Socialism, Workers' Power, and so on. Moreover, in academe one can also note, harmful to this day, intellectual investment in fallacy, long after its refutation: a phenomenon by no means uncommon even in the hard sciences. But perhaps even more important was mere parochialism -- as Joseph Brodsky once pointed out, some people in the West were simply not up to facing the reality of the Soviet past. And indeed if one does not know, or ignores, a good deal of world history, one cannot believe in some of the things that could and did happen.

It is a remarkable fact that some of the soundest understanding of the

Soviet phenomenon, even in the West, came from novelists -- George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, and a few others. This was surely because an effort not merely of the intellect, but also of the imagination, was needed for a true view.

It seems clear that serious Western research, gradually establishing the truth about the Soviet background and motivations, had powerful effects on our own political and intellectual classes, Democrat and Republican, Conservative and Labor, Socialist and Christian Democrat, and contributed to sound policy. In the Soviet Union itself, such work penetrated either in English or in Russian editions printed in the West, or in samizdat translations. Educated Russians are touchingly grateful, and maintain that the effect was highly important in disinfecting their minds, liberating their critical spirit, and hence to the whole phenomenon of glasnost.

Glasnost was of course intended to provide a forum for discussion on ways to improve the system. But freish, then freer, publication led above all to a great printing of these historical facts, almost always tending to put the whole regime in question. This was a major element in the path to the recent revolution. History, the struggle for true history, does have its effects in the great world!



#### IV

How was it possible in the pre-glasnost period for a Western historian to write Soviet history? His sources were few, scattered, often of doubtful reliability. He was in the position of a historian writing about some empire of antiquity, and relying on a few score papyri, a few scant inscriptions. Successful work could only be done by comprehensive search, following up all possible leads, and considering them in the most careful and critical manner. It contrasted markedly with another approach by Western writers who -- even quite recently -- accepted the official published material of the period, a congeries of massive falsification, and rejected in principle unofficial reports and memoirs, some of which at least were true.

Now, the conditions of the study have radically changed. The thirty to forty million files -- files not documents -- of the Central Party Archives are or will be available, with a similar number in the secret police records, and millions more elsewhere. Which, in the words of Shakespeare's Mark Anthony "which, pardon me, I do not mean to read."

But, of course, this material (in whose release I have been closely

involved) is highly welcome. Russian researchers have already made much plain which was formerly obscure, and we have been able to use this. They will produce more. But it will be a long, tedious and indeed in one sense uncompletable job. Arnold Toynbee actually prefers our understanding of the Greco-Roman epoch on the grounds that it is "not encumbered and obscured by a surfeit of information."

For even if such a mass of "documentation" were in some sense fully available or usable, or a representative selection possible, it would still not in itself tell anything like the full story. It is not so much a gift as a challenge to true, critical scholarship. As a great researcher once wrote "It is perfectly possible, as all who have made any historical researches can attest, to read bale after bale of despatches and protocols without catching one glimpse of light about the relations of governments."

Documents do not describe the circumstances of their composition. For example, I have read some of the lesser secret police interrogation reports, and they appear as rational questioning, with the prisoner giving very detailed factual answers. Nothing on paper shows the true context of torture. At least, the wording does not: but occasionally reality breaks through, as with the

"forensically identifiable" bloodstains on the interrogation record of Marshal Tukhachevski.

But, as I say, even if the documents were pure records of what they purport to be, they would not give more than a part of the true picture. Moreover beyond a certain point "research" can lose its usefulness. If undertaken in a more or less automatic way, without a background of knowledge or of practical judgement, it invites the comment made by Sir Joshua Reynolds, a scholar as well as a painter: "A provision of endless apparatus, a bustle of infinite inquiry and research ... may be employed, to evade and shuffle off real labor, -- the real labor of thinking."

Anyone who is not genuinely addicted to the search for knowledge is unlikely to have the psychological energy to be a true scholar in any field. But in history this work resembles more that of a detective than of a scientist -- a search for and judgement of particular evidence rather than of repeatable experiment. And no system of procedure is possible.

Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff tell us in their The Modern Researcher, that the process of historical verification is "conducted on many planes, and its technique is not fixed. It relies on attention to detail, on common-sense reasoning, on a developed 'feel' for history and chronology, on familiarity with human behavior, and on ever enlarging stores of information." And, they conclude, "No interesting or important question ... can be settled without detailed knowledge, solid judgement, lively imagination and ability to think straight. What to do and how to go about it come with practice; to enumerate rules would be endless and of little use." This is, in fact, the crux: that "judgement" is needed, that it is a delicate matter, and that no mechanical criteria for validating or rejecting evidence exist.

## VI

Having discovered, or amassed, his array of facts, the historian must now achieve a synthesis. He must, in a few hundred pages, in some way present the experience of millions of people over years of time. As Macaulay put it, no history can give the whole truth; "but those are ... the best histories which exhibit such parts of the truth as most nearly produce the effects of the whole."

The procedure implies the forming of general impressions from a mass of material, considered not only in itself but in the perspectives of other knowledge. This again is not a mechanical art, and cannot be made so. We need knowledge of much human history of other periods and places and of the motivations of men and cultures far different from what any parochial view can give us.

It is indeed not easy to get into another man's skin, let alone that of another culture. The great French general Conde once remarked to the Cardinal de Retz that the reason why historians got things wrong was because "these rascals make us speak and act as they themselves would have done in our place." But if academics fail to understand the temperaments of the soldiers of

their own culture, they are all the more unlikely to grasp the temperaments producing and produced by other traditions.

As for the modern autocracies, these simply cannot be put in perspective without some knowledge of the "pre-critical" orders of antiquity and the great Asian military empires; and, on the other hand, of the millenarian sects of, say, 15th-century Germany. I feel, in this context, much in debt to Norman Cohn's The Pursuit of the Millennium, which demonstrates that, in spite of a modernized vocabulary, "Communism and Nazism have been inspired by fantasies which are downright archaic."

Yes, we must consider Soviet history, and with care, but we need a broad outlook on history as a whole. And above all we should avoid consciously or unconsciously projecting onto other cultures the feelings, ideas and motivations we feel natural, and refrain from applying analytical concepts developed in our own backyards to the wild deserts and steppes of the outside world.

And it cannot be urged too strongly that this is not merely an abstract intellectual matter. Michael Howard in 1980 remarked of the "real lessons of history" in his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor at Oxford, that these apply

to "people, often of masterful intelligence, trained usually in law or economics or perhaps political science, who have led their governments into disastrous miscalculations because they have no awareness whatever of the historical background, the cultural universe of the foreign societies with which they have to deal. It is an awareness for which no amount of strategic or economic analysis, no techniques of crisis management or conflict resolution ... can provide a substitute."

A recent example was the erroneous and misleading concept, prevalent in important political circles here, that the Soviet Union could be democratized and still remain in being: for some time this had a distortive, and potentially quite dangerous, effect on our foreign policy.

## VII

More generally, it is the bane of the non-exact sciences or studies, that they tend to become prey to constrictive theorists. Marx was, of course, one of these -- one of the most irritating habits of the old Soviet historians was their invariable reference to pro-Soviet Western writing as "scientific" and "objective." Indeed, the Soviet order itself was supposedly constructed on "scientific" lines. A Moscow joke of the period runs: "Comrade, was our system invented by scientists?" "No, comrade, if scientists had invented it they would have tried it out first on hamsters."

The notion that economic or class interests are decisive in history seems particularly inappropriate in the epoch of Lenin and Stalin and Hitler and Mao and the Ayatollah and all the others. It is perfectly clear, for example, that Soviet history over two generations had as its central drive ideas in the minds of its leaders -- ideas forced upon society, the economy, the culture, everywhere by a political mechanism, contrary to all the natural trends of the country.

Marxism is pernicious because it is constrictive and selective -- but above all nowadays, more broadly, as a bad example. For it implanted the idea that a



"science of history" is possible. Marxism, as it is today, may seem less of a nuisance than some other efforts. Indeed, there are a few (a very few) who write from a more or less Marxist point of view whose work, though inevitably distorted, is still critical and useful. These have usually played down Marx's gross overemphasis on the socio-economic, and refined his clumsy categories of "feudalism" and so on. And at least this Marxism does not demand a rigid systemification: it believes in the possibility of coherent thought; and it rejects the notion that the whole of life and art and literature has no significance beyond the suppression of social or other categories -- more than can be said of a certain level of contemporary academe. However, that raises problems which seem psychological and political rather than intellectual, though in a sense they may be regarded as particularly absurd and extreme examples of a more widespread reductionism.

## VIII

At the more serious level, a key word in modern studies of politics is "model." With its overtones of something that works in the same way as its original, like a model steam engine, it is highly unsuitable. Politics are *sui generis*. And though they may be conveniently treated under general categories for some purposes, this must not be pressed beyond what is possible and appropriate.

When we first learn history, we start with simple specifications.

Conditions producing the French Revolution:

- (1) Feudal burdens on the peasantry,
- (2) Influence of Rousseau, Voltaire, etc.,
- (3) Example of the American Revolution,

and so on; a simple "model."

After some years of immersing oneself in the material, and in the material of much else in human history, one can begin to see 1789 in all its interwoven complexity. And any "prerevolutionary model," or "crisis model," will seldom be of much greater use than the specifications and definitions of childhood.

Moreover, as Alfred Cobban, a leading historian of the period, puts it, these theories are used to select the facts that fit them, which are then used to confirm the theory...We should anyway, at this stage, hardly need such props.

A great scholar in a comparable field, putting it rather strongly, wrote of such rules, that they " ... are nothing but a string of generalizations, necessarily inaccurate, which have been framed by the benevolent for the guidance, the support, and the restraint, of the three classes of persons." They are "leading strings," he said, for infants, "crutches" for the incapable, and "straitwaistcoats" for the demented. This is unfair to the extent that some otherwise qualified people find it easier to grasp facts presented schematically, even mathematically; what they should not do is try to impose this on the study as a whole. In particular, schematic methods are indeed easier to teach and learn than knowledge and judgement. But teaching of knowledge and training in judgement are possible, and desirable, and must not be pre-empted in this way.

Models are also misleading because they imply that the similarities between historical phenomena are more important than the differences. Models, moreover, are often projections of the parochialism we spoke of earlier, being based on social science kits derived from the Western experience or outlook

only. Yet another trouble with modelling, however complex and sophisticated, is that the complexity and sophistication may be applied to phenomena which are not in themselves of any real relevance -- though they may appear on the face of it to be so. Phrenology achieved wide academic recognition and support in the 19th century. Its assumptions seemed reasonable -- that the brain is the organ of thought; that its shape in a given case must be an indication of that brain's particular characteristics; and that this shape is broadly speaking reflected in the structure of the surrounding skull. Phrenology produced an immensely complex analytical system. But it was totally valueless. For the phenomena it took as representing the truth were in fact irrelevant. Similarly with many scientisms of today.

There is a subspecies of modelling -- the attempt to reduce it to mathematical treatment. There is nothing new in mathematical treatments of politics. Nearly a quarter of a millennium ago the great Leibniz produced in Specimen demonstrationum politicarum pro eligendo rege polonorum (1669), his "mathematical proof" that the Count Palatine of Neuberg should be elected King of Poland. (He wasn't.)

Of course there are regularities in the general sphere of the study of

history and of political cultures and their interactions. There are measurables, for example, in economic and -- to a lesser extent -- sociological matters, and admirable work can be done with them. But these constitute only part and in most cases not a decisive part, even of their own phenomena. Useful within limits, they should not be allowed to metastase over the political culture taken as a whole.

Indeed, from Pythagoras through pyramidology, extreme irrationalities have often been presented in numerical form. Astrology for centuries used the most sophisticated mathematical treatments available -- and is now worked out on computers: though there is, or used to be, an English law which provided that "every person pretending or professing to tell Fortunes, or using any subtle Craft, Means or Device ... shall be deemed a Rogue and Vagabond."

As to mechanical and mathematical devices in general, we already have to hand a system of symbols, complex and subtle, capable equally of accurate description and of profound analysis: language. Language, properly handled, can represent historical or political events with the necessary combination of clarity and imprecision.

Sir Ernest Gower in his classic Plain Words, wrote of certain analysts that "Some of them strain after expert language because they are afraid that if their manner is lucid their matter will be despised as elementary. But no sensible reader supposes that what is easy to understand must have been easy to think of; and where the matter is really elementary (as sometimes it is bound to be) obscurity of manner reduces, not increases, the reader's respect for the writer's intellectual power."

Sorokin long ago remarked on the "speech disorders" of his fellow sociologists, including "the blind transference of terms from the natural sciences," the "ponderously obscure description of platitudes" and "neologisms which hinder precise communication." Similar complaints from serious scholars appear regularly in the press after every social or political science convention: terms frequently complained of include "script," "hegemonic" and so on--though there are worse ones which I cannot bring myself to pronounce, and probably couldn't if I tried. It all reminds me, perhaps unfairly, of eight-year-old boys looking important when using long words, or ten-year-old boys' air of insufferable superiority when exchanging remarks in their gang's "secret language."

I lately had a letter from a graduate student of history at a well-known University (not my own, I hasten to add). In his department, he wrote, some professors thought history should be readable, others not: which view did I take? Well, since recording something on paper is done with the intention of transmitting information or opinion to others, the answer might seem obvious.

Whether avoiding language or misusing it, efforts to be, or to appear, rigorous have always been with us. They seek to avoid what seem to their sponsors to be old-fashioned, pre-scientific treatments of reality. But, as A.E. Housman once wrote, "the old unscientific days are everlasting; they are here and now; they are renewed perennially by the ear which takes formulae in, and the tongue which gives them out again, and the mind which meanwhile is empty of reflection."

## IX

Aristotle long ago noted the necessary differences of approach among the disciplines: "In studying this subject we must be content if we attain as high a degree of certainty as the matter of it admits. ..."

As Aristotle implies, a greater degree of exactness is to be sought in the hard sciences -- methods by which, it was said almost a century ago of a famous British physicist:

He saw the invisible,  
He split the indivisible,  
He changed the immutable,  
And unscrewed the inscrutable.

Perhaps a worthy aim for the physicist, but anyhow not within the scope of a student of the human condition. We, on the contrary, as Vaclav Havel has put it, must cease to look for "a system that will eliminate all the disastrous consequences of previous systems," and seek instead "something different, something larger. We have to abandon the arrogant belief that the world is



merely a puzzle to be solved." And, he adds, "in a word, human uniqueness, human action and the human spirit must be rehabilitated."

Havel was speaking as one who has suffered, with his people, the totalitarian experience. Totalitarianism is a concept long rejected by many Western writers on Communism. We were lengthily and tediously rebuked for allegedly using the "totalitarian model." "Totalitarian" is a word. When we used it as such, we were not competing in the modelling field. We were conscious that it is a broad, general, descriptive term, not a definitive one. We meant, presumably, that as far as was feasible the state tried and grosso modo succeeded in directing human life. Leszek Kolakowski and Giovanni Sartori, among this country's leading political philosophers, found it a helpful term. Later, both Gorbachev and Yeltsin used it of the Soviet regime. But it is depressing to think that there were experts who could not have grasped, let alone accepted, the great Soviet author Vasily Grossman's observation, "the extreme violence of totalitarian social systems proved able to paralyze the human spirit throughout whole continents."

Totalitarianism was rejected because it implies a whole set of motives and actions. Modern scholastics were, and are, primarily concerned with institutions,

with forms. But resemblances of form rather than of intent or actual activity tend to mislead. A wolf bears a very close resemblance, physiologically speaking, to a basset hound. Its reaction to a pat on the head, however, is different. Two identical cars may present different dangers if one is driven by an alcoholic psychopath. Such distinctions were evidently not available to the well-known Sovietologists who, ten or twelve years ago, argued at length about how very similar the Soviet and British political systems were.

These lifeless methods are also urged on the grounds that they involve an otherwise unobtainable "objectivity." For, it is argued, a good historian must be "objective" in the sense of not having opinions or emotions concerning his subject. Such postures of objectivity in fact merely conceal opinion. It is the frank admission by the historian that he indeed holds specific views which forces him to treat the evidence as objectively as possible. As G.M. Trevelyan puts it, "The dispassionateness of the historian is a quality which it is easy to value too highly, and it should not be confused with the really indispensable qualities of accuracy and good faith." And the sceptical Edward Gibbon refers to the Jansenist scholar Le Nain de Tillemont as both sunk in "bigotry," and at the same time an "incomparable guide," full of "erudition, diligence, veracity and scrupulous minuteness."

So, yes, reasonable objectivity is not beyond the powers even of those with strong opinions. Some of the best historians, from Thucydides on, have in fact been politicians, and their views on particular policies can be and have been disputed. Clarendon, the first English historian -- or rather the first for the near millennium since Bede -- was one of the leading Royalists. Yet it has been said that for four generations his work was politically seminal both for the Tories who agreed with him and the Whigs who disagreed, and gave them both a wider scope of mind and a broader perspective, leaving them better Tories and better Whigs.

Of course historians write from various points of view, and the account given varies accordingly. But this is no more than is true of a set of photographs from various angles, in different lights, which will give pictures which differ in many ways, without therefore being false or misleading if read with a modicum of common sense.

## X

One aim of these supposedly objective and scientific operations is to generate prediction. And indeed, if this were to be possible, it would be a remarkable and substantial achievement.

But, even in much simpler fields, such as the flow of water over a dam, or the weather, it is now accepted that such prediction is not feasible, since the initial conditions cannot be adequately specified.

History and politics are of course the realm of the unspecifiable to a far greater degree than such physical systems. In history and politics, in fact, the accidental, the totally unpredictable is often decisive. "If Mirabeau had lived one more year," as Carlyle puts it, the history of France and of the world could have been different -- and in major ways. A hundred such examples will spring to any historian's mind. Moreover, the decisive turn may be due to some quite trivial occurrence, hardly entering into the observer's consideration.

One reason for history's inability to predict is that, as Marx himself noted, "Happenings which are strikingly analogous but which occur in different historic

milieux, often produce totally different results." It is impossible to develop a simple structure of cause and effect between "events." For, in Trevelyan's words, "An historical event cannot be isolated from its circumstances any more than the onion from its skins, because an event is itself nothing but a set of circumstances, none of which will ever recur."

Of course, a profound knowledge of world history, and of the particular facts and background of a given country's evolution, may produce a general grasp of the range of possible outcomes in a given situation; and may even offer some idea of probabilities. But even then the result may contain surprises. We could and did predict, even in the 1960s, that the Soviet regime was not viable and that drastic change would occur: we could and did predict that if free elections were held the Soviet Union would disintegrate: but not the how or the when. And no conceivable advantage, apart from the comforting delusion of rigor, could accrue by putting these possibilities in "scientific" form. In fact, as John Morley wrote, such an approach "applied to the vast complexity of man in the social union...is either mischievous or futile, and mischievous exactly in proportion as it is not futile."

Indeed, the mere fact that we still differentiate between the humanities and the exact sciences is an admission that these are, whatever the partial and occasional overlap, different areas of thought. History spans the political, the social, the economic, the psychological, the cultural, all the aspects of the human being in life, where the individual is both autonomous and dependent on others, in which his or her mind operates at many levels, in many contexts, with many results. It covers the inexhaustible variety of the human condition, of individual minds, and of the cultures in which they exist. History, in principle, brings together the whole of human creativity, and destructiveness, in a never complete or final synthesis -- but all the same as a major concentration, neither too absolute nor too ambitious, of our hard-earned wisdom as a species.

Jefferson is quoted as saying that someone who knows nothing is nearer to the truth than someone whose mind is filled with falsehood and errors. But he thought we could do better than that. And so we can.

Thank you.

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