

The Historian in Prosecutor's Garb: The Idea of Legal and/or Moral Responsibility in Historiography¹

Commonalities Between the Jurist and the Historian

Participating in the debate over communism's alleged crimes, Stéphane Courtois, an historian of that ideology, has noted that "that the first two phases of the operation of historiography and those of judicial action are shared: first, the search for documentary evidence; then, the comprehension and explanation of the facts. From there, they diverge." He continues:

On the one hand, the historian is called—in a "representation" phase—to establish a narrative that is scientific, and therefore modifiable as new knowledge accumulates. The judge, conversely, is led to pass a juridically decisive judgement. On the other hand, the purpose of an historian's definition of communism's crimes through juridical categories—defined here by the Nuremberg Tribunal—is not to "formulate a judgement and a verdict," but to characterize as precisely as possible criminal offences.²

Indeed, law and historiography share several fundamental paradigms: the search for truth based on facts from the past; investigation; the presentation of "exhibits;" testimony and the evaluation of witnesses (according to the kind of jurisprudence that forms source criticism); the use of "pieces of evidence," etc. If it is true that "legal principles cannot be transferred as-is into historical research," that the demands in terms of evidence are not of the same nature, and that—and this is a decisive difference, but one that is not always observed, far from it, and it's precisely this difference that will be the theme of my reflections today—the historian is not supposed to, having reconstructed the facts, regardless of how incriminating they are, pass judgement on, nor present a prosecutor's charge against (nor plea for the acquittal of) figures from the past.³

A new, problematic situation: French historians heard in court as witnesses for the prosecution.

The French historian Henry Rousso has been highly critical of the many failed juridical commemorations in France that have punctuated the end of the last century and the beginning of the twenty-first, like the trial of Maurice Papon, prefect of the Bordeaux police under the Vichy regime. After a successful career in the upper echelons of the French civil service, Papon was rather belatedly accused of accessory in crimes against humanity for having handed Jews over to the Nazis. Reacting to this trend, Rousso has said that "this boiling-over of our past strikes me as just as worrisome as the denial of the past."⁴ In *Vichy, l'événement, la mémoire, l'histoire*, he dedicates a chapter, "Juger le passé," to reflections on the compulsive, tardy judicial rituals that marked France at the turn of the last century. In this chapter, he thoroughly investigates the ambiguous, conflict-ridden relationship between justice and history, a relationship worsened in France as far as Vichy is concerned by twenty years of renewed or extremely tardy legal proceedings brought against the last survivors and perpetrators of the French State's crimes. Rousso raises

¹ Translated by M.A. and William M. Burton

² Stéphane Courtois, ed., *Du passé faisons table rase! Histoire et mémoire du communisme en Europe* (Paris: Laffont, 2002), 238. [Where English versions of the texts cited herein exist, I have used them. So, unless otherwise noted, all translations of quotations are by me. —*Trans.*]

³ Paul Peeters, "Les aphorismes du droit dans la critique historique", Académie royale de Belgique. Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences morales et politiques, 5th series, book 1945, pp. 81-116. See as well "Les aphorismes du droit dans la critique historique", 5th series, book 1946, erratum, p. 279. Commented on by Carlo Ginzburg, *Un seul témoin* (Paris: Bayard, 2007) p. 29.

⁴ Henry Rousso, *The Haunting Past. History, memory, and justice in contemporary France*, trans. Ralph Schoolcraft (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2002), 12.

some perplexing questions as to the alleged civic and “pedagogical” role of these confused trials, where historians are transformed into witnesses for the prosecution.

In the 1990s, during the trial of Paul Touvier, a former member of the Vichy regime’s paramilitary group the *Milice française*, four “experts” were called to the stand: René Rémond, that formidable Mandarin of French historiography and the American Robert O. Paxton, who wrote the first classic work on Vichy,⁵ as well as François Bédarida and Michel Chanal. Again, they came to courtroom to speak the historical truth... at the *prosecution’s* behest? What could this mean?

But the civic and moral problem is not so simple, you can already tell. It is, in fact, a dilemma: is not telling historians who have become witnesses for the prosecution that they’re stepping out of their role in the end playing into the hands of the far right by calling for amnesty, by giving up on the idea of trying old crimes—statute-barred crimes—thus sending both victims and butchers back into the night of a distant past?

Laws establishing historical truth

This new phenomenon of historians in service of the prosecution has been joined by another historico-juridical tendency, unknown until recently, but equally significant at the end of the twentieth century. In several eastern and western European countries (though one will notice a similar trend elsewhere in the world, South America, South Africa, for example), for a quarter of a century, legislation has been passed that proclaims and establishes historical facts, or that forbids the denial of those facts. In France, they call them “*lois mémorielles*” (memorial laws), for France has had the distinction of passing a number of them. In Europe, the first of these statutes were very logically reactions in Germany to the perverse propaganda of a handful of Holocaust revisionists, who had been alarming public opinion. Such was the case for the Gayssot Act passed in France in 1992, followed by a law on the Armenian genocide, itself succeeded by an article of the “French law on colonialism,”⁶ which was eventually retracted under pressure from indignant adverse lobbies, that assessed the “positive” character of the colonial enterprise. Last but not least, we also saw the passage of the Taubira Act, which established the African slave trade and slavery as crimes against humanity.

From the very beginning, these pieces of legislation, called for and hailed by certain groups, have provoked a certain discomfort. Though it might seem legitimate to forbid a sophistic denial of the gas chambers, nevertheless the principles of freedom of expression and freedom of opinion—which are foundational to democracy—are thereby challenged. As for historians, they were almost unanimous in declaring their malaise with the Gayssot Act, a legal text that presupposed an historical truth that it was no longer legal to contest.⁷ In the end, an old historian who often has the ear of power, the aforementioned René Rémond, had to publish a vigorous critique of all these bills, *Quand l’État se mêle de l’histoire*, demanding their complete withdrawal in the name of the historians profession.⁸

Historiographic ethics, or “duty of state.” The *reality of the past*.

Historians must fulfil what Catholic theologians call “a duty of state.” In a certain way, only the present is real, but historians are required to believe in the reality of the past: that is, to put themselves in service of a

5 Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (New York: Knopf, 1972).

6 “Loi française du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés.”

7 Other French laws—like the law on amnesty, which supposedly not only erases the crime, but also forbids mentioning the condemned facts themselves – had already complicated—according to a very different, antagonistic “logic”—the historian’s task.

8 Other historians, however, have called for a Europe-wide law against Holocaust denial (*Historiker für europaweites Gesetz gegen Auschwitz-Leugnung*). Other pressure groups are scrambling to get the European and national parliaments to pass their own bills.

past reality, a reality that is moving further away, becoming more obscure, that forever eludes the grasp of the present—historians are required to attempt to speak the truth of this past reality. Too bad for them if that word, “truth”, is a bitter pill to swallow; too bad if they’d rather not be taken for “positivists”... I’m not saying that historians can discover or rediscover that lost truth, certainly not in its entirety. But they must at least look for it, in precisely the same manner as the modest folks chosen to be jurors, who do their best—despite their uncertainties and doubts—to decide what has happened in the case before them.

So there is an ethics of historiography, however little sanctimonious, however sceptical I want historians to be: an ethics, or a fantastical mandate, impossible to fulfill thoroughly, but an ethics that historians cannot simply brush aside. They have a duty to the Dead, and this duty prominently includes “doing justice” to them, and from that point on, distinguishing between the innocent and the **villainous**. If you don’t believe in this vain duty, in this useless service—then you ought to change professions. As Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg writes, with the intense conviction his work expresses: “There’s no Herodotean or Thucydidean oath for historians, as there’s a Hippocratic oath for doctors, but if there were, respect for the dead would have to be in it.”⁹

Pierre Vidal-Naquet, in his comments on Michel de Certeau’s *The Writing of History* and the controversy surrounding Robert Faurisson, the notorious Holocaust revisionist to whose case Vidal-Naquet dedicated much time taken from his work as an historian of Antiquity, vigorously contests the pan-discursivism and Pyrrhonism in fashion in the eighties—everything is discourse, everything is fiction. Vidal-Naquet insists on maintaining that historians, even while recognizing their incapacity to reconstruct the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, are required, like judge and jury are, to seek, to the best of their abilities, to speak—and he dares use this unfashionable term that makes great wits chuckle with pity—the *truth* of the past. He writes:

I was convinced that there was an ongoing discourse on the gas chambers; that everything had to go through a discourse; but beyond this, or before this, there was something irreducible which for better or worse, I would still call reality. Without this reality, how can we distinguish between fiction and history?¹⁰

Thinking about Holocaust revisionism as well, Ginzburg, against the sceptical postmodernism of Hayden White and company, who confuse the duty of the historian with the freedom of the narrator to create elegant and “effective” fictions, notes ironically that “[w]e can conclude that if Faurisson’s narrative were ever to prove effective, it would be regarded by White as true as well.”¹¹

Jacques Bouveresse, one of France’s handful of analytical philosophers, echoes Ginzburg. “From the point of view of Paul Veyne,” who in his *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* historically relativizes the notion of “truth” as a sequence of successive “programs of truth,” Bouveresse writes,

we can reproach someone like Faurisson not for having denied an “objective” truth, in the sense that such a truth is confirmed beyond the shadow of a reasonable doubt, but at most of having been clumsy or unlucky enough not to have succeeded in the moment in imposing “their” program of truth. Nevertheless, in theory, the Faurissons of tomorrow still have plenty of opportunities.

9 Carlo Ginzburg, “Just One Witness,” in *Probing the limits of representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1992).

10 Ginzburg, “Just One Witness,” 86. Translation modified.

11 Ginzburg, “Just One Witness,” 93.

A widespread motivation: the historian's work inspired by the desire to settle a score

Historians of ideas—and I will be referring mainly to them in what follows—are researchers whose work has often come under the rubrics of both *raison d'être* and “settling a score,” so to speak. If only because of their object choices: prefascism as it appeared in France; the illusions of progress; psychiatric power; scientific ideas mobilized to control bodies and behaviours, to *normalize* human beings; Russian gnostic origins of Leninism... You can easily enough to add *names* to this brief catalogue.

Undoubtedly, the principle of the parable of the mote and the beam would be quite instructive for these intellectuals, who aim to settle a score. But since they help us see the mote in the ideologies or pseudo-sciences that they objectify, genealogize, periodize and detest, we can nevertheless have a certain amount of confidence in their hostile insightfulness.

Other “vocations” that have inspired historians of ideas seem no less estranged, in their primary motivations, from the equanimity recommended to scholars. Such is the case of those historians who have had scores to settle with “their people” and with themselves—the case of German historians dealing with Nazism, for instance, devoted to the painful purpose of retracing the “genealogy” of evil—a desire inseparable from a large dose of collective shame that has become stoic and sublimated, if you will.

In general, the 20th century's great historians of ideas all start with horror—the World Wars, the Shoah, Stalin's Great Terror, the Gulag—and from there pursue, against the flow of time, the genesis of the Idea, with all of the risks of anachronistic *ex post facto* moralizing and of imputing accessory before the fact that this procedure brings with it. Indeed, it is the latter, fluid, not always explicit, category of accessory before the fact that guides these historians' analyses of the “role of ideas” in history.

The history of ideas is a hybrid genre, combining the apparatus of knowledge—historicization, typologies, conceptualizations, operations based on the product of vast archival investigations—but bringing with it, no less visibly than the trappings of historiography in many cases, a polemical intention coupled with a personal commitment, with the presence of a subject judging and questioning their contemporaries *through the intermediary of the past*. Historians of ideas sometimes admit that they were inspired by something, in the present moment or in their “lived experience,” that has stimulated and oriented their work of reinterpreting the past. No-one expresses this sentiment more clearly than François Furet in the first pages of his study of the historiography of the French Revolution, a study he admits is inseparable from his repudiation of Soviet totalitarianism: “Today the Gulag is leading to a rethinking of the [1793] Terror precisely because the two projects are seen as identical.”¹²

The problem of imputing moral or quasi-criminal responsibility to certain ideas, based on their later culpable applications.

Very often, historians of ideas *start*, I was saying, with a horrible historical fact, *a priori* inexplicable in its very horror and inhumanity, and they wonder what ideas “carried the seeds” of this fact, what ideas and proponents of ideas played the role of inciting and instigating—and of justifying, of approving in advance—the great crimes of the 20th century. In brief: could we have predicted the horror if only we had decoded the “ideals” that motivated it? In historian Paul Hollander's words: “Can it ever be anticipated that the pursuit of attractive ideals or ends will lead to mass murder and widespread suffering?”¹³

This is where the most important problematics at the heart of the history of ideas enter the discussion; they are still as current as they are classic, and still contested as well, controversial, the various debates over the “intellectual origins” of the major events in modern history: the origins of the French Revolution, of the October Revolution, of totalitarianism, of Nazism, of genocidal anti-Semitism, of Italian fascism or generic fascism... There are hundreds of books in our libraries that bear those words,

12 François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press / Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1981), p. 12.

13 Paul Hollander, *The End of Commitment. Intellectuals, Revolutionaries, and Political Morality* (Chicago: Dee, 2006), 4.

“Intellectual Origins of...,” in their titles.

Many historians of ideas harbour moral suspicions when they begin their work: namely, that certain ideas from the past—not only the expressly hateful ones but *also* other ideas, doctrines, programs, with their fallacious appearance of innocence and humanitarian goodwill—were intrinsically dangerous and that their harmfulness, inseparable from a certain degree of absurdity and a lack of realism, should have been perceptible in germ well before anyone thought of finding those ideas an “application.”

To preserve certain ideas from possible challenges, progressive historians have applied, in the first instance to the 1789 Revolution, the old thesis or the old sophism of “unforeseeable circumstances” that led to the deterioration and perversion of ideas that were *in and of themselves* excellent. This thesis served throughout the 19th century to exculpate the Jacobins’ Enlightenment-inspired ideas from the crimes of the Revolution and the 1793 Terror.

Contemporary historians, now more suspicious, tend to interrogate the ideas that drove historical actors, and in their wake, the “great thinkers” that inspired those ideas. This is François Furet’s thesis and tactic when dealing with the revolutionary terror: it was neither unfortunate happenstance nor exterior aggression that created 1793; the root of the Terror is the “falseness” of the Jacobins’ ideas. (After which we still must ask where those ideas came from—and in reaction to what they were formulated.)¹⁴

There derives, however, “spontaneously”, as it were, from this kind of questioning, an approach or a deviation that presents the historian of ideas with a certain methodological danger; nevertheless, they do not deny themselves this method, often having undertaken their work only with the goal of ending with an indictment. The risk historians of ideas run when adopting this approach is to pass from the more or less convincing demonstration of a more or less mediated influence exerted by earlier ideas on later reprehensible actions and activities that *claimed to follow those ideas*—to the imputation of “responsibility” for these ideas and the assignment of moral or quasi-judicial (?) guilt to those who held and propagated them. And this, generally well before any action was taken, and regardless of the later “material factors” that alone made the aforementioned action possible.

Thus, by utilizing this technique, historians choose surreptitiously to work within a *juridical* logic, a prosecutorial logic, that might for example see them accuse an individual of “criminal negligence” by ruling out the mechanical factors and blind spots that made the alleged recklessness a “crime” through its concrete consequences. This paper’s goal, then, is to decide if it is the job of historians to understand and make understood, or to condemn: if, in putting on the prosecutor’s garb, historians are not mistaken about which role is theirs to play.

Can ideas be morally or legally characterized?

Can ideas—at least ideas that have been expressed, that have circulated—be reprehensible in and of themselves? Can *bare discourses* be punishable by law? One has only to look at the French Penal Code, which places next to crimes of “defamation” and “hate propaganda” the crimes of “apology of acts judged criminal”, “abetment”, and “incitement” leading to reprehensible actions. Which, some splenetic characters might say, would bring the wrath of the law down on pretty nearly every extreme ideology, both right and left, found in the two centuries of modernity. So much for the juridical aspect.

But if we think in terms of everyday morality, we find a new aporia. Is it possible to conceive of an ethics of belief and argumentation? Is it wrong to believe in the conspiracy of the Elders of Zion, in the superiority of the Aryan race—or in the Laws of history and “better tomorrows”? Are there criminal beliefs and illicit forms of reasoning? The question is hardly raised, and it is often dismissed out of hand. It opens up too many difficulties. And when it is brought up, it’s only done in the face of ideologies that I, like everyone else, have reason to hate in advance. To reason stupidly, that’s conceivable. But to hold a

14 Everyone in France who opposed the “revisionist” school of Furet et al. have in fact gone back to the “circumstances” argument, to the oppressive legacy of the Ancien Régime, to the enemies at the gates...

“villainous belief”, that’s of the same order as “green ideas”: a semantic impossibility. Except that this rejection leads us straight to yet another aporia: how can reasonings and conceptions—which by their essence should be innocent, or should by their essence be outside of the realms of good and evil—how can they be so often used to justify inhumane acts? And how, then, can beliefs that would make inhuman actions innocent, commendable even, how can they not be guilty in and of themselves? Massacring Armenians, Jews, Roma, Kulaks—all of this is wrong, but the forms of reasoning that led to the belief that these massacres were necessarily, highly desirable, heroic, and virtuous should be outside of the question of good and evil. Forms of reasoning ought to be at most either well- or ill-founded—and even then, they would only be judged ill-founded according to a different logic than the one they recommend as excellent. If, for an individual (and their ideological family), certain actions are fully justified by their convictions, and if I judge these actions to be monstrous, how can I not judge the individual guilty for having entertained such beliefs? For we blame the Serbian ultra-nationalist, the anti-Semite, the Stalinist, the Khmer Rouge, the Islamo-fascist for actions which, from their point of view, were not and are not in any way blameworthy, because their logic and their “conscience” advises such action, approves it, even glorifies it.

The origins of fascism and Nazism in ideas: a marked tendency in contemporary historiography

There is a marked tendency in contemporary historiography to emphasize, much more than historians have in the past, the role of ideas and their “responsibility” for the totalitarian crimes of the past century, and, running specifically counter to the historiographic tradition in this domain, the role these ideas played in fascist movements and regimes.

For example, the study of Italian fascism has long been delayed by the prejudices held by antifascist historians, for whom fascism “did not have an ideology,” or had an ideology that was too absurd and perfunctory to deserve study.

Emilio Gentile was the first to take this ideology seriously, to seek to retrace its origins, with his 1975 study *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*.¹⁵ Contemporary historians of fascism in its various forms (in opposition to their predecessors, who saw only packs of thugs working for Big Capital and mobilizing a demagogic discourse that was without interest) have underlined the *primacy* of ideas in the genesis and attractiveness of totalitarian movements: “Ideas and beliefs were primary ingredients in the process that brought fascism into being.”¹⁶ If in the beginning, fascism lacked the complexity of Marxism-Leninism, the material that it drew from—counter-revolutionary critiques, Social Darwinism, integral nationalism, corporatism—is abundant, diverse and has its roots deep in the 19th century. Now the consensus is as follows: fascism, a syncretic cobbling together of ideological elements transformed into a totalitarian system, devised “an authentic ideology and [...] a consistent project of formatting individuals and society,” an ideology that presented itself as a third way between an impotent and discredited democratic liberalism and unpatriotic socialism.¹⁷ Even if in practice, in its development, Italian fascism was an “imperfect totalitarianism,” at its heart, the ideology expounded a totalitarian “ideal,” a rationalization of the “Total State” to which all life in Italy, public and private, had to be subordinated. An ideology inseparable from the establishment of worship practices and liturgies, the *Culto del Littorio*, an ideology one of recurring themes of which was that it was above all “not a dogma,” not fixed, but an active “faith,” always forging ahead, adapting itself to “Life,” etc.¹⁸

Fascism—which includes Nazism in Roger Griffin’s generic definition, shared by other English-

15 Emilio Gentile, *The Origins of Fascist Ideology (1918-1925)* (New York: Enigma Books, 2005).

16 Trygve R. Tholfsen, *Ideology and Revolution in Modern Europe: An Essay on the Role of Ideas in History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 105.

17 Pierre Milza, “Le totalitarisme fasciste, illusion ou expérience interrompue?,” in *20^e siècle 100* (2008).

18 See in particular: Pier Giorgio Zunio, *L'ideologia del fascismo. Mito, credenze e valori nella stabilizzazione del regime*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985).

language historians—expounds above all a proper ideology that defines it, and this ideology played a major role in its cross-class success in the various countries where it was very popular among the masses.¹⁹ This ideology and its “mythic core” are the source of the various fascisms’ well-known traits: cult of personality, corporatism, «étatisme» and statolatry, expansionism, aestheticization of politics, militarization of social life in peacetime, enrolling youth in the party, a climate of permanent upheaval and the momentum of successive vast projects. One might suppose that the headlong rush into militarism and warmongering derives from this as well, since war is an unfailing recipe for “national regeneration!” What distinguishes fascism from “ordinary” dictatorships is precisely this role that ideology plays and this attractiveness. An analysis in political and economic terms alone will not suffice to reveal the nature of fascism.²⁰

The situation is the same for historians of Nazism, who have increasingly emphasized the importance of Nazi ideology and its villainous uniqueness. James Rhodes, in his study of *The Hitler Movement as A Modern Millenarian Revolution*,²¹ writes: “In the tradition of Eric Voegelin and Norman Cohn, I think that the National Socialist ideology should be seen as a more or less coherent millenarian and gnostic world view that must be taken seriously if the Nazis are to be understood.” He continues, “[T]he Nazis believed that their reality was dominated by fiendish powers and they experienced revelations or acquired pseudo-scientific knowledge about their historical situation that made them want to fight a modern battle of Armageddon for a worldly New Jerusalem.”²² Rhodes makes a millennialism founded on the feeling of an “ontological catastrophe” into the Nazis’ essential motivation and the fundamental explanation of their criminality, ruling out the reasons traditionally put forward—economic crisis, for example—that he considers contingent and reductive. He emphasizes that it is crucial that the Nazis’ conception of the meaning of their own actions be considered centrally and taken seriously: “In all its manifestations and especially in the National Socialist case,” he writes, “millennialism appears to begin with an experience of confusion and a strong fear of annihilation which can be called the ‘disaster syndrome.’”²³ He continues:

[T]his study [...] concludes that the millennialism hypothesis gives the best answers to the perplexing questions about this specific group of revolutionaries. [...] By stressing the primacy of apocalyptic motives in the National Socialists, it does not deny the existence or significance of ideological, economic, psychological, and other passions.

The idea of the responsibility of ideas and of those who disseminate them. Next: the apparently complementary, but much more controversial, case of Marxisms—and Marxists. The French and pan-European debate over *The Black Book of Communism* and on the responsibility of ideas and the communist faithful, given the deplorable results of their beliefs in application.

With a belated but exceptionally violent spurt, the 1997 publication of *The Black Book of Communism* in France rekindled the long-lasting debate on the role and record of communism, mobilizing the press as a whole and every essayist in sight, with no signs that controversy is about to die down. *Un pavé dans l'histoire*,

19 Emilio Gentile, *Qu'est-ce que le fascisme? Histoire et interprétation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).

20 The definition of “generic fascism” around which there has supposedly formed a “consensus” in the English-speaking world today is the British historian Roger Griffin’s, the leader of the “fascist studies school”. This definition claims to extract a constant “mythic core” of fascism by scotomizing for heuristic purposes the variable “national” demands and variable scientific and historicist rationalizations that mask it. “Fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core ... is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism” (Stephen D. Shenfield, “Defining Fascism”, in *Fascism: Critical Concepts in Political Science*, ed. Roger Griffin and Matthew Feldman [London: Routledge, 2004], I:286. Complete definition in: Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* [London: Routledge, 1993], 44).

21 James Rhodes, *The Hitler Movement: A Modern Millenarian Revolution* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1980).

22 Rhodes, *The Hitler Movement*, I and 18.

23 Rhodes, *The Hitler Movement*, 19.

by Pierre Rigoulot and Ilios Yannakakis,²⁴ recounts the first months of the polemic surrounding the “memory of communism” in France, positioning itself from the accusatory point of view of the book’s contributors. Several years later, the collective text *Du passé faisons table rase*.²⁵ introduced French readers to the contrasting receptions *The Black Book*’s translations met in all of Europe’s countries and languages: very favourable in the East, reticent in the West—with intellectual France, as always, a clear exception, diverging from the countries who had known “real socialism,” despite the reluctance of a rearguard of prudently recycled *apparatchiki* who had preferred not to “stir up the mud” of the past.

Some have said that the authors who contributed to this book-event called for a “Nuremberg for communism.” This is not true, and would in any case be impracticable (communist regimes not having been militarily conquered) and politically inconvenient (despite the trial of several Czech leaders responsible for repression, for example). But they certainly affirmed loudly and clearly that the task of historians of communism, equal to the effortlessly recognized duty of historians of fascism and Nazism (this incidental comparison by itself made some academics howl), is not to content themselves with describing, enumerating, explaining and situating in time the history of communism, but, when they must, to *indict*.

They must, at very least in the discourse of historiography, not in the judicial order, *indict* the crimes committed, their perpetrators, their instigators, their sponsors. The central issue is not to call into question the “crimes”—despite the polemics on their extent and their *numbering*, as we’ll see further on—but to determine as regards those crimes the responsibility of ideology—and, consequently and more or less explicitly, the responsibility of those in the West who “professed” that ideology and fought for it all while remaining, of necessity and by accident of birth, exterior to the its “implementation” in the hands of “real socialism.” I quote from *Un pavé dans l’histoire*:

Is communism a crime? The question might seem idle, a bit provocative. And the millions of dead as a result of the Soviet Revolution? And Trotsky’s massacre of the sailors in Kronstadt in 1921? And the famine organized to reduce the resistance of a large part of Ukrainians during sovietisation in 1932-3? [Etc, etc.] How then can one dare call into question the criminal character of communism? In truth, that a gruesome bloodbath is linked to the history of communism is no longer in question, but the nature of that link is. Is communism responsible for such butchery? Does communism carry within itself crime, as, in Jaurès’ formulation, the cloud carries the storm and capitalism, war? The reservations expressed here and there when the *Black Book* was published bore more on the fact that the criminality of communism had been located at the ideology’s heart, rather than in the crimes themselves. “It’s a human drama that concerns entire peoples”, Robert Hue[, then secretary-general of the French Communist Party] declared on the radio. He wrote more clearly in the press that “Systemic, massive, horrific crimes were committed on the watch of state leaders who claimed to follow communism.” [...] It remains to be seen what place must be assigned to these “systematic, massive, horrific crimes”. In *The Black Book*’s optic, communism is accountable for them. In its detractors’ view, communism is certainly soaked in blood, but against its will.²⁶

The stakes of the whole debate are well summarized here. Ought a regime founded on a particular ideology be judged according to its work, and the regime’s ideology with it *ipso facto*? Do the results—

24 Pierre Rigoulot and Ilios Yannakakis, *Un pavé dans l’histoire* (Paris: Laffont, 1998).

25 Stéphane Courtois, ed., *Du passé faisons table rase! Histoire et mémoire du communisme* (Paris: Laffont, 2002; new edition: Pocket, 2009).

26 Rigoulot and Yannakakis, *Pavé dans l’histoire*, pp. 13-4.

always appallingly the same—of *ideocratic* regimes try the convictions of their actors and challenge the “ideal” of their partisans?

The great aporetic question of the 21st century: Generous ideas and the legitimization of horror and inhumanity

The apparently insoluble problem of the interface between history, ethics and law is not an issue involving those ideas from not too long ago that called—literally and without hermeneutic effort—for the repression, the hatred, the persecution of the Other, nor is it an issue of expressly racist, anti-Semitic and genocidal doctrines and of the unanimous reproof they have earned from society.

Whether we like it or not—we can see in this problem a vain prompt to vague meditation on the good intentions with which the hell of the 20th century was paved, leading to a flaccid invocation of the precautionary principle, given the feckless chain reactions of recent events—the question of political and ideological evil is at the heart of the modern history of ideas. Specifically, the question of *the transformation of good into evil*, of good people into evildoers, of the generous idea into a legitimization of the inhumane, of, in Régis Debray’s words, “**le retournement de l’humaniste en fanatique, du persécuté en policier.**” This about-face is at the centre of Debray’s reflections on history, but he doesn’t offer a very clear explanation of the inevitable and fatal character of this reversal, nor does he use his insight to propose any practical conclusions.²⁷

We’ll start with what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn posits at the beginning of *The Gulag Archipelago*: “Thanks to ideology, the twentieth century was fated to experience evildoing on a scale calculated in the millions.”²⁸ Lenin and Bolshevism are accused, but Solzhenitsyn’s charge is more encompassing still, for the Russian novelist’s line of reasoning starts with a contrast: Shakespeare’s villains satisfy themselves with a half-dozen corpses; to accumulate millions, you need to possess another kind of cruelty and inhumanity, and it is precisely this modern thing, unknown to the English playwright and unthinkable in his time, that the Russian writer designates “ideology.” The question revolves around the *change in the scale* of inhumanity in the 20th century, a change resulting from the intersection of technical means and eschatological frenzy disguised as “scientific” doctrine. All of that century’s total ideologies, from left to right, led to the designation of certain lives as “useless;” they legitimated the murder of wretched people in the thousands and millions; they conceived of and justified mass terror; they practised with conviction the decimation of entire populations.

The central question inscribed in the paradigm of *the transformation of good into evil*, on which there is a vast and ever-growing library of divergent recompositions of data and contradictory argumentation (which, in turn, will interest historians of ideas, for this debate—which will be central to the 20th century in the eyes of the 21st—is not over, far from it) is, therefore, the problem of the “responsibility” of revolutionary ideas, of egalitarian and socialist utopian ideas, of Marx and of the various Marxisms, or of Lenin and the Bolsheviks alone, in the Soviet Tragedy.²⁹ The Nazis’ racist ideology leads to Auschwitz—horrifying, but logical. But what, in terms of ideas, leads to the Bolshevik terror, to the Gulag, to Stalin’s exterminations, to the repeated, large-scale massacres of those poor wretches turned political opponents?

An unexpected metamorphosis?

In the 1930s, the Catholic philosopher Waldemar Gurian—an anti-communist, it goes without saying—

27 Régis Debray, *Critique of Political Reason*, trans. David Macey, abridged edition (London: NLB, 1983). (*Critique de la raison...*, p. 361.) ????

28 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney and Harry Willets (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), vol. I, p. 132.

29 Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia* (New York: Free Press; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan, 1994).

wrote of the “metamorphosis” of an intrinsically good idea, socialism, into a horrifying regime: “la doctrine s’est transformée en devenant, au lieu d’utopie d’avenir, justification du terrorisme et de la privation de tout droit de l’individu en face de l’État de parti.”³⁰ But this unexpected “metamorphosis” remained, as such, inexplicable... The question might seem naive, but it remains pertinent today. As Stéphane Courtois writes, “Why did modern Communism, when it appeared in 1917, almost immediately turn into a system of bloody dictatorship and into a criminal regime?”³¹ To this unanswered question, it is obviously possible for “right-wing” thinkers to formulate the contrary hypothesis of a logical conclusion or of a wicked “potential” already quite visible in the projects and ideas of communism—and perhaps, if they widen their scope, in all of secular political modernity. Positioned at the head of the Soviet state was a group of “ideocrats” motivated by a specific doctrine that caused immense tragedy: probing that doctrine and questioning its ostentatious, though perhaps misleading, character of “utopia of the future,” dedicated to humankind’s happiness, seems then a reasonable method.

The capacity and will for “total” control of society by the Bolshevik party-state, the intensity of terror and repression, varied a great deal from Lenin to Stalin, from Brezhnev to Gorbachev, and this is what makes the application of the controversial concept of “totalitarianism” to the entire period of 1917–1991 debatable. But the fact that the *raison d’être* of the Soviet state was to realize, at any cost, a specific global project of societal transformation founded on “ideas” is inherent to the USSR’s history from beginning to end. The term “ideocracy” finds its meaning here. It is important, then, to look into the very nature of this project, which an historian like Martin Malia has judged to be intrinsically chimerical from stem to stern.

Everywhere a communist regime was established, the same theories led to the same kinds of liquidations, deportations, massacres, generalized policing and terror. What responsibility, right-wing historians ask, certain they’ll embarrass the “progressives,” does Karl Marx bear for the bloody and repressive nature of all of these regimes that on every continent claimed to follow him? To what point are the “unforeseen” results of a supposedly emancipatory project not unrelated to certain elements of Marx’s way of thinking? In Carl Linden’s words: “Is original Marxism to any degree accountable for the despotic character of the Marxist-Leninist party regimes in the various parts of today’s world?”³²

As such, this kind of direct, bipolar, simplistic question—and the “potential” response that it entails—is obviously sophistic. Several immediate objections come to mind, at least. The ideology that was hegemonic and official in the USSR was *said* to be Marxist, but were the country’s institutions and social values “inspired” by anything at all that came from Marx, except in the most superficial sense? Moreover, is the primary source of Soviet despotism Russian or Marxist—or a result of the fateful convergence of the two, as Alain Besançon would have it? Is so-called Soviet Marxism something like the “unexpected meeting” of a rational Western doctrine and an irrational Russian mentality? That’s what the Russian historian Mikhail Heller seems to be saying in his book *Cogs in the Wheel: The Formation of Soviet Man*, where he mentions the “Soviets’ incredible receptivity to the irrational as soon as it took on a scientific appearance.”³³ What’s more, how can we assert the disastrous omnipotence of the Marxist-Leninist idea in the USSR and at the same time, the thesis—held by Leszek Kołakowski and other historians today—according to which no-one, at least no-one after Krushchev, whether in the masses or in the Apparatus,

30 Waldemar Gurian. *Der Bolschewismus: Einführung in Geschichte und Lehre*. Freiburg iB: Herder, 1931. • *Bolshevism: An Introduction to Soviet Communism*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame UP, 1952, p. XXX!!

31 Stéphane Courtois in *The Black Book of Communism*, 853., p. XXX!!!

32 Carl Linden, *The Soviet Party-State. The Politics of Ideocratic Despotism*, New York: Praeger, 1983, p. 1.

33 This quotation is translated from the French edition (Michel Heller, *La machine et les rouages: La formation de l’Homme soviétique* [Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1985; reissued: Paris: Gallimard, 1994], p. 73). Strangely, Heller’s English translation lacks this sentence. Nevertheless, cf *Cogs in the Wheel: The Formation of Soviet Man* (New York: Knopf, 1988), pp. 54-61. —*Trans.*

believed anymore in that idea? (“[B]y the end,” David D. Roberts writes, “virtually no one believed any longer that Marxism-Leninism could be used to mobilize the population”³⁴).

There is, however, a reply to these objections. A simple distinction is called for. Soviet bureaucrats did not have to “believe” in the verbalistic humanitarian portion of so-called “Marxism,” in the “Classless society,” or in the “Dictatorship of the proletariat”—but it seems obvious that they nevertheless believed in something, from Lenin to Gorbachev inclusively, something that they persisted in believing—despite perpetual refutations—something at the ideological heart of their ideocracy: the superiority—not moral, but productive—of the collectivist mode of production, founded on the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production and exchange and on the planned economy. It is when radical doubt about the feasibility and efficacy of this system in the classes of the Apparatus itself began to sap this dogma—*raison d’être*, which was constitutive of the USSR, that the system truly began to falter.

This querying the “role” of Marx and of Marxism (two separate questions) is still, in large part, at the step of a confusion of problems. The topos of Marx-spinning-in-his-grave is a commonplace among liberal researchers who want to spare the author of *Capital*, like Anthony James Gregor, who writes: “Karl Marx would have found very little in the political culture and political institutions of Cuba, China, or Russia that he could identify as Marxist,”³⁵ etc., etc. Without a doubt! Does the Stalinist system have its source in Marx or in some aspect of his thought, *or* do we on the contrary find in his work (and we do, quite easily) an early repudiation of Stalinism, of totalitarianism? Would Marx be “spinning in his grave,” etc.? These are so many muddled formulations, without interest because without possible answer. Only the aforementioned Leszek Kołakowski, the great Polish historian of Marxism, brings himself to ask the question in terms apt to receive a response that is not simply a sophistic confusion of chronology, duration and scales. For Kołakowski, the only well-formed question bears on *applicability*—and he proposes his own response: “Was every attempt to implement all basic values of Marxian socialism likely to generate a political organization that would bear marks unmistakably analogous to Stalinism? I will argue for the affirmative answer [...].”³⁶

19th-century utopias on trial.

January 1st, 1800: Robert Owen opens a “humanitarian” factory in New Lanark, Scotland, where loathsome money is to be replaced by “labour notes”.³⁷ December 25th, 1991: Mikhail Gorbachev confirms the dissolution of the USSR. Between these two dates, between this new year’s day and this Christmas, two centuries of great expectations mobilized immense masses on all six inhabited continents. They motivated a proliferation of mass-ideological and philosophical reflections around ideas that appeared during the Enlightenment, first and foremost the idea of progress and that of revolution, and around utopian projects and promise. A vast question results from the narrative collision I’ve just sketched. This question, in its turn, has not ceased to haunt contemporary reflection. These great expectations, one asks, precisely because of their utopian character, because of their promise of “vista scene changes,” of a global remedy to all social evils near at hand, because of the historical determinism that shored them up from the distant days of Saint-Simon, Fourier, Leroux, Colins and the other romantic socialists onwards, because of the spirit of negational, blind belief they inspired —did these great expectations not obviously play a role—a

34 David D. Roberts, *The Totalitarian Experiment in Twentieth-Century Europe. Understanding The Poverty of Great Politics* (New York, London: Routledge, 2006), p. 268.

35 Anthony James Gregor, *The Fascist Persuasion in Radical Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 395.

36 I quote from his essay “Marxist Roots of Stalinism”, in *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, Robert C. Tucker, ed., (New York: Norton, 1977, reprinted 1999), p. 284.

37 Labeled “one hour” and multiples thereof—one hour of labour of any kind equalling any other. See: Robert Owen, *Courte exposition d’un système social rationnel* (Paris: Marc-Aurel, 1848) and *Dialogue entre la France, le monde et Robert Owen, sur la nécessité d’un changement total dans nos systèmes d’éducation et de gouvernement* (Paris: Chaix, 1848).

decisive, disastrous role—in the misfortunes of the epoch? Did they not lead to the horrors of a 20th century that “acted out” by setting up, inspired by their vain blueprints and their fallacious “laws of history,” bloodthirsty ideocracies?³⁸

The 1917 Revolution did not produce a regime at a “superior stage” than bourgeois democracies and market economies, nor even a rational alternative, but, as Martin Malia remarks, an “ideocracy,”³⁹ a regime (much to the disgrace of the Marxist representation of base and superstructure) founded on an unrealistic program, on a “utopia” (in the negative sense of the word) articulated with a form of “gnostic” belief dressed up as so-called “scientific” knowledge, a system dedicated to realizing an intrinsically unfeasible project: “Of all the reasons for the collapse of communism, the most basic is that it was an intrinsically nonviable, indeed impossible project from the beginning.”⁴⁰ It was a system that through terror and perpetual need, through generalized “policing” and the material and moral misery of three generations, sought to make a practical impossibility work—up to and including its very ruin. In other words, the alleged responsibility would be inseparable then from the academic, chimerical and unrealistic character of a portion of modernity as developed in the Enlightenment.

A formulation even more morally paradoxical than the preceding: *Deliver us from evil.*

The great, devastating paradox of all of modernity amounts to locating the primary root of the 20th century’s misfortune not only in supposedly emancipatory, benevolent and rational ideas, but also in the very project of “delivering the world from Evil.” For this is what everything comes back to: this is what was, at the beginning of the 19th century, a “new idea in Europe.” Socialism defined itself from the beginning—around 1830—as the finally discovered Remedy that would once and for all deliver humankind from social evil:

Q: What do you understand by “socialism”?

R: The doctrine [...] that would, by putting humanitarian law into practice, make all the evils that tear society apart disappear.⁴¹

A “religion of Revolution” was born in the after-the-fact of 1789, not as the will to reform or alleviate certain social evils but, in Israeli historian Jacob L. Talmon’s words, as an “insurrection against evil itself,” an insurrection that will end only when evil has been eradicated, regeneration accomplished, immutable justice established on earth.⁴² This seems in fact to be the fundamental psychagogic element that in the long run has nourished militant thought and, for conservative minds, piteously fuelled that thought’s perversions: the will to deliver oneself wholly and rapidly from social evil.⁴³ From 1830 on, the militant

38 Thus we have gone from “*siècle-charnière*” (transitional century), the 19th, that conceived of these ideas, to the “*siècle-charnier*” (the mass-grave century), that tested them. A bitterly witty formula of Philippe Muray’s.

39 The concept is borrowed by M. Malia from Waldemar Gurian, the first Catholic theoretician of “totalitarian religions”. See *op. cit.*, and *Bolschewismus als Weltgefahr* (Lucerne: Vita nova, 1935) ► *Le bolchevisme, danger mondial* (Paris: Alsatia, 1933).

40 In Lee Edwards, ed., *The Collapse of Communism* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), p. 71.

41 Greppo. *Catéchisme social, ou exposé succinct de la doctrine de la solidarité*, Paris: Propagande démocratique et socialiste, 1848, p. 5.

42 *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1970 [1952]. p. 19. POLITICAL MESSIANISM

43 Indeed, non-social evil, “natural” evil—and this characterizes modern thought in general—is no longer conceived of as an evil, insofar as it no longer outrages and haunts. Everything has changed since Voltaire: the Lisbon earthquake no longer impels contemplation, but exploitation and pauperism outrage us. Not only is evil social, but there is in the end no evil but social. Property, family, the city, wrote Pierre Leroux explicitly, “outside of the evils that are brought to us by these three sources, there is no evil for us; for there is no truly human evil outside of these three sources”.

stands up, in an undaunted moral posture, to a society that must be entirely destroyed, that must be razed with all of the evils it bears within itself. A socialist in Louis-Philippe's day is someone who "glimpses" a luminous future imbued with the certainty that "evil is condemned to disappear from the world."⁴⁴ Evil does not come from nature ("from God", as they wrote at the time); it comes from society, and society could be organized completely differently. As scandalous as social evil was, the conception that one procured of it liberated the mind of a more distressing, irremediable scandal: that evil might be in the heart of humanity itself, indissociable from this terraqueous world. Social evil is, on the contrary, doubly evil, because once one has understood its roots in society's organization, there exists henceforth a global "remedy." One must, the Fourierist Victor Considerant writes, "know evil to determine its remedy," but one must above all know the "remedy" to demonstrate that the evil is that much more criminal, because merely derived from a poorly organized society, a society that only brings happiness to villains and that must simply be abolished. The militant line of reasoning draws from evil's omnipresence the conclusion that society is badly designed, and the correlation that it could be entirely redesigned on "other bases," and at the same time the moral necessity and "historical" inevitability of the advent of Good. The revolutionary syndicalism of the Belle Époque places in its turn what would become a rigid axiom at the heart of its "revolutionary" doctrine: any reform of "bourgeois society" is vain; we must wipe the slate clean and reconstruct from scratch. "We cannot hope for the improvement of present society; we must transform it. It is defective. It is to be destroyed. Its bases and principles are bad, and all efforts to paper over its cracks or reshuffle its order are destined to failure."⁴⁵

The very will to make humankind happy and to overcome once and for all evil is the root of the greatest misfortunes; nothing is more to be feared and more to be fled than a person possessed by such a mandate: these are the recurring theses of pessimistic minds like Gustave Le Bon, around 1900, and Emil Cioran, the latter with his pessimistic maxim that "[e]very work turns against its author."⁴⁶ Gustave Le Bon, who famously theorizes the perpetuation of irrational beliefs among the "masses," wrote: "Torquemada, Bossuet, Marat, Robespierre considered themselves to be gentle philanthropists, dreaming of nothing but the happiness of humanity."⁴⁷

During the entire 19th century, the dialogue of the deaf between the innovators and the conservatives over the beauty of democratic ideas was cemented as a dispute over *the supposed proof of those ideas' harmfulness* found in the crimes of the Revolution. Thus in a Saint-Simonian dialogue the Innovator and the Conservative argue:

Innovator: Are you familiar with the Rights of Man and of the Citizen as proclaimed by the democrats of '89?

Conservative: I know the excesses of '93, and that's enough for me.⁴⁸

Liberal and anti-socialist publicists⁴⁹ in the 19th century immediately recognized and denounced—thus proving in the eyes of the humanitarian-minded their innate villainy—the paralogism or fallacy that draws the remedy for evil from the recognition of evil and from the attribution of multiple evils to a supposed easy-to-eliminate single cause: there is misery and inequality with individual property, *therefore* it

44 Louis de Turreil. *Religion fusionnienne, ou doctrine de l'universalisation réalisant le vrai catholicisme*, Tours/Paris: Juliot, 1879, p. 216.

45 André Lorulot and Yvetot, *Le syndicalisme et la transformation sociale* (Paris: Librairie internationaliste, 1909), p. 11.

46 E. M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

47 Gustave Le Bon. *Psychology of Socialism*, trans. not credited (New York: MacMillan, 1899), p. 96.

48 Jean Terson, *Dialogues populaires sur la politique, la religion et la morale* (Paris: Prévot, 1840), p. 70.

49 In an archaic sense of the French *publiciste* or the current meaning of the German *Publizist*: "A writer on contemporary public issues; a journalist who writes chiefly on current affairs" (Oxford). —*Trans.*

must be abolished and replaced with its contrary; there are people who need work, *therefore* the state can and should give work to everyone... Society is imperfect, it is therefore reformable; society is bad from end to end, it must therefore undergo a total reform shaped by principles contrary to those that currently govern it. As diverse as they might be, from Catholics to Social Darwinists to Nietzscheans, the adversaries of progressive grand narratives start from premise of the *irremediable* to reject radical social remedies as chimerical: that is to say, progressives' opponents also found their ideas on a presupposition—a pessimistic vision of “human nature.” Herbert Spencer, the liberal sociologist and denouncer of “statism,” said: “Man is imperfect. The state cannot improve him by decree.”⁵⁰ Liberal thinkers do not reproach socialists their desire for a good society—or, rather, yes, they do reproach them it, but they do so by accusing them of preparing an inevitably worse society, even if it is one paved with good intentions. In a way, the horror that collectivist and anarchist and other projects inspired in them was a consolation for living in a society full of misery, but a society that had its good sides for them and where all was not lost.

Another “trial”. The trial of intellectuals in the service of the Inhumane and State Terror.

The attraction that chimerical, extreme ideologies enjoy in relationship to the miserable, the humiliated, the exploited is not scandalous. But intellectuals comfortably settled in benign democracies who put their talents and their prestige into the service of totalitarian projects have sparked outrage: a library of pamphlets hounds these “arm-chair intellectuals”⁵¹ with their gullible propensity to extremism combined with verbalism, their duplicity, their “revolutionary” showmanship, their voluntary blindness, their lies—and these polemics denounce as well the benefits of glory and prestige that intellectuals' posturing and imposture extract for them.

Beyond these easy targets for pamphleteers, the historian must resolve a heavier problem, less easily lent to satire. That the visionaries, the clever, the careerists and the opportunists, and the failures, too, espouse total ideologies, so be it—but why Brecht and Lukács, Éluard and Neruda? What did they have to gain? Did they not thus compromise and degrade their talent? In his memoirs published just before his death, the French literary historian René Étiemble comes back to “an enigma, never fully solved: how could so many great minds from our country fall prey to Stalinist fascination?”⁵² He does not give us the key to the riddle.

The trial of the intellectuals—namely apparatus and party intellectuals, as well as the more or less credulous or light-weight minds of the “fellow-travellers,” the “useful idiots”—this trail of the intellectuals in the service of the revolution has a long history, not solely derived from reactionary efforts. Though Max Weber was attempting before 1914 to characterize the “pariah intelligentsia” and its deleterious role in modern societies, and Gustave Le Bon denounced in his learned works the “half-scholars and doctrinaires,” those “discredited, misunderstood” also-rans, as the “natural adepts of socialism,” it was a Polish anarcho-syndicalist who gave the Belle Époque a *Marxist-leaning* theoretical expression to the denunciation of party intellectuals as the new clergy of a fallacious religion imposed on the exploited class. In 1898, Waclaw Machajski came to formulate the axiom of a doctrine that would become known as “Machajskism.” The collectivist socialist project, he postulated, is in no way the expression of the working class's worldview. It is the ideology of a new class whose role has become paramount in modern society, the ideology of the “intellectual class,” imposed on the gullible exploited masses and destined to permit the aforesaid intellectuals to install themselves in power after a Revolution they sanctimoniously baptize “proletarian.” Marxist socialism—proclaimed “scientific” with its “cult of the intensive development of productive forces,” of ineluctable industrial development, guided by laws “superior to the will of humans” and identified with technical *and* social progress—“seduced this new intelligentsia” and “legitimated in

50 Cited by: Paul Boileau, *Les trois socialismes: Anarchisme, collectivisme, réformisme* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1895), p. 52.

51 Georges Suffert, *Les Intellectuels en chaise longue* (Paris: Plon, 1974).

52 Publisher's blurb, Étiemble, *Le meurtre du Petit Père : naissance à la politique (Lignes d'une vie II)*, Paris: Arléa, 1989.

some way the knowledge elite's aspiration to succeed the capitalists in the name of historical reason, by skilfully dissimulating the simple greed of its class interests."

If we intend to reflect in an even larger historical framework, what appears *constant* in the very long run—from the Brethren of the Free Spirit and the Joachimites of the Middle Ages to the Puritans of the English Revolution, to the romantic utopians and the ideologue-leaders of the Second and Third International—is a correlation between a private intelligentsia with legitimate status, but poor and socially marginalized, and the popular spread of great antinomianist and millenarist systems of thought. Following Norman Cohn and several other historians, Luciano Pellicani remarks quite rightly that "[t]he history of revolutionary gnosticism and of the proletarianized intelligentsia has [*sic*] much in common. The *prophetae* of the millenarian movements of the Low Middle Ages and the professional revolutionaries of the 20th century were *in* society but not *of* society."⁵³ What's revealed here is not the status of a hypothetical rising class and its tactics for acceding to power, but the dominated and vain position of social critique and resentment held by this intelligentsia without status or prestige, *in* without being *of* society, a position that invites them to respond to the diffuse resentment of the dominated by prophesized the fall of this villainous world and the birth on its ruins of a reconciled society.

Portrait of the historian as prosecutor

As I said at the beginning of this paper: the history of modern ideas is only very rarely a dispassionate project born out of historical interest alone. Historians of ideas, historians of political ideas, above all, settle scores—and they don't hide it—with the past as an intermediary, a past which decidedly does not pass. Historians who describe and analyze the ideological tendencies of the 1930s—or even the 1830s—are in fact settling scores with the distant but lingering contemporary descendants of those ideas.

From that point on, they establish themselves as prosecutors: they accuse and question; they place the past's ideologues before their "responsibilities"—a word frequently used by the Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell as he submits "prefascist" writings from 1880 to 1914 and the fascist writings of the 1930s, the doctrines of which are indicted in his books, before the tribunal of history. Sternhell expressly invites his present-day readers—and especially his adversaries who refuse to recognize the depth of fascist saturation in France before 1940—to a self-examination they refuse to participate in. Moved by strong convictions, with his analysis of the fascist permeation of France in the 1930s that prepared the shame and dishonour of 1940, he stirs up this past only because it seems to him, despite his adversaries' denials, that there remain after-effects and still-warm ashes that could rekindle.

Other historians of ideas—foremost the famous opponents of Cold War "historicism"—Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, Jacob Talmon, Karl Löwith, Eric Voegelin, who remain, with all due criticism, great heuristic models for historians today—have understood their task as combat, an academic combat, certainly, but often brutal and likely to create irreconcilable enemies, as they struggle against threatening "totalitarian" ideas, the "*historicization*" of which was apt in their eyes to sap the authority and pretensions of those ideas.

No less convinced of the need to pursue at once rigorous intellectual work *and* a civic task of intellectual hygiene, of denunciation of the "impostures" that have the upper hand today, a task that involves bearing certain blows, someone like Pierre-André Taguieff today faces off against the "populist illusion"⁵⁴ and the perversion of the French left into anti-racisms and anti-fascisms that he has shown to be manipulated and fallacious.⁵⁵ Historians of modern ideas do not rest inside their proverbial "ivory towers"—whence the hybrid character of their projects, among the most substantial, perspicacious and

⁵³ Luciano Pellicani, *Revolutionary Apocalypse: Ideological Roots of Terrorism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), p. 11.

⁵⁴ Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'Illusion populiste. Essai sur les démagogies de l'âge démocratique* (Berg, 2002, reprinted: Flammarion, 2007).

⁵⁵ Cf, e.g., *Les contre-révolutionnaires. Le progressisme entre illusion et imposture* (Paris: Denoël, 2007).

innovative in the sector, projects in which the attempt at erudite objectification competes nevertheless for prominence with the subjective, engaged position of the pamphleteer, committed to a difficult intellectual combat, a discourse position that I have described as that of courageous, solitary truth against triumphant imposture.

Ethical-methodological conclusion: Do not pose as prosecutor. An approach to be ruled out as morally absurd and methodologically ill-founded.

I believe that, at the end of the day, despite the good psychological reasons that there might be to take this path, we must resolutely reject and oppose the tendency, irresistible to some historians (and not the least of them), to discuss thinkers and ideas from the past in terms of *accessory before the fact*. We must also oppose the complementary tendency to transform the convoluted sequences of an intellectual genealogy into a slippery-slope determinism only perceived *a posteriori*, as well as the propensity to reprimand impudence and complicity *in hindsight*, which is to say: phenomena that only appear as such retrospectively.⁵⁶ And we should further guard against the tendency to pass surreptitiously from there, from the description of an historical genealogy charting the emergence and aggregation of scattered ideas into a system—and from that point to the catastrophe that the system engendered—and from there to a *retrodictive* political-moral judgement articulated with various *ex post facto* fallacies—that is, in sum, the tendency to combine anachronism, finalism and moralism in constantly equivocal and “**underhanded**” pronouncements. Why? Because such approaches are all at once morally “pharisaic”, arrogant and methodologically fallacious, because anachronistic.

It would seem that for many good minds, the analysis of ideas and their role in history leads to a teleology (which they obviously cannot accept theoretically); it leads to the notion that ideas must await their “application” or an application by those who claim to follow them to be *judged*.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau has in particular had his motives put on trial in the last half-century. The study of this indictment—which has occurred in the English-speaking world—deserves to be undertaken. Jean-Jacques, we hear from various quarters, “[is] to be given special responsibility for the emergence of totalitarianism.”⁵⁷ One thinks above all of Jacob L. Talmon’s work, including his first book, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*,⁵⁸ which started with Rousseau and passed by Babeuf and the Conjuración des Égaux to end up at the totalitarianisms of the 20th century in all their horror. Talmon claimed to discover in Rousseau’s ideas, concepts and reasoning the originary matrix of all the ulterior ideologies that he labelled “totalitarian democracies.”⁵⁹ There is a sophism inherent in this alleged sequence of events. François Furet, however, exonerates Rousseau and nuances: “Rousseau is hardly ‘responsible’ for the French Revolution, yet he unwittingly assembled the cultural materials that went into revolutionary consciousness and practice.”⁶⁰

It seems to me that however “understandable”—human, all too human—this attitude of the historian-prosecutor, outraged by crimes committed in the name of certain ideas, is, such a posture is in reality a mixing of genres and indefensible. Enzo Traverso emphasizes this: historians must resist all temptation to transform themselves into prosecutors, and this, particularly in the “mentalitaire”

56 And the adjacencies and proximities in complicities.

57 John W. Chapman, *Rousseau: Totalitarian or Liberal?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), p. vii.

58 Jacob L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1970 [1952]).

59 In his *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase*, Jacob Talmon considers *so-called* utopian socialisms, starting with St-Simon. The social systems that proliferate between 1815 and 1848 are presented as one step in the evolution of the radical ideas that will lead to the Bolshevik Revolution. The hope for universal regeneration, the conviction that human history has an ultimate plan and goal, the feeling of apocalyptic imminence engendered by the experience of the French Revolution, no less than by the Industrial Revolution—all of this contributes, according to Talmon, to the formation of a “messianic faith established on the bedrock of man’s natural goodness”.

60 Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, p. 51.

conjecture the West finds itself in today, which from all quarters beckons in the name of a disenchanted democracy to a judicialization of modern history.

Historians must resist this invitation to participate in this juridical process because history is uncertain, because the sequences of ideas and actions are convoluted and obscure, and because thinker-actors simply do not have the means to suspect the eventual results of the consequences of their ways of thinking.⁶¹

The tendency to transform the history of ideas into a prosecutor's charge implies, to my mind, an arrogant and naive "presentism." The medical and psychiatric theories of the 19th century about women and hysteria, on "pederasty," despite their positivistic confidence and their experimental equipment, were malicious and absurd, thoroughly penetrated by myth and phantasm—this is true. *But* my feminist and egalitarian convictions today, which authorize me to characterize the pince-nez-sporting scholars of the past as "chauvinists" and "homophobes," are completely rational and irreversibly acquired? Really now! The present and its ideas—particularly its preconceived notions—cannot be the world's tribunal. Historians are not arbiters or time-travellers who would come down from the future to tell the people of the past that such a discourse was well-founded and sagacious, and such another was not; that such an idea, with its appearance of good faith, was in fact reprehensible, dangerous and foolhardy!

More and more often, in a pseudo-juridical ritual of exorcism, the contemporary doxa calls the past before the tribunal of the present, which will condemn and cover with opprobrium a pro-slavery and quite undemocratic Plato, a sexist and, once again, pro-slavery Jefferson, a homophobic and not at all feminist Sigmund Freud, etc. There can be hardly any doubt that all of the crimes committed by the famous dead against the present and its vague values will pass through this tribunal.

Another attitude—rather megalomaniacal, this one—is that of historians who, having duly demonstrated the contingent historicity of, the variations in, notions of "liberty," "democracy," etc., offer up their own definition—this one supposedly a-temporal and neutral. To historicize a concept is to reject the idea that we can step outside the current of history to produce a neutral, "transcendental" definition for a concept. This is what Quentin Skinner objected to in Isaiah Berlin's political theory: the latter's attempt to elaborate a neutral definition of liberty was an "illusion."

Out of a desire to dissociate himself from the enemies of a Sartre who "was always wrong," Jean-François Sirinelli, near the end of his *Sartre et Aron*, a comparative biography of two of the last century's intellectuals, writes that "there is no need to place the final analysis on the register of guilt, for [...] historians do not investigate criminal cases." When studying Sartre's political positions, his thought, his immense influence, there is no need to "burn him at the stake to exorcise a henceforth shameful past."⁶²

For his part, Jacques Julliard invites—in Traverso's footsteps—historians not to cede to what he calls "the spirit of the times" in this beginning of the 21st century, "an epoch whose tendency is to institute itself as a permanent tribunal of itself, as well as of all epochs that have preceded it."⁶³ The past is more and more required to excuse itself to the present; someone must be found to express their posthumous "repentance" before the media for a criminal past: the French Republic of the year 2000 beats its chest in the name of Vichy's crimes.

Carlo Ginzburg also concludes that historians should not establish themselves as judges. They should not allow themselves to hand out sentences. Their truth—the result of historians' research—does not have a normative character: it remains partial and provisional, never definitive. Historiography is never fixed; for with every epoch, our gaze on the past changes, we interrogate it with new questions, we sound it with new and different analytical categories.⁶⁴ Historians can lead their readers to a moral judgement, but this, only

61 Enzo Traverso, *Le passé, modes d'emploi: Histoire, mémoire, politique* (Paris: Fabrique, 2005), p. 74.

62 Jean-François Sirinelli, *Deux intellectuels dans le siècle, Sartre et Aron* (Paris: Fayard 1995), p. 375-6.

63 Jacques Julliard, "Avant-propos," dossier on "Eugénisme et socialisme," *1900 18* (2000): pp. 3-4.

64 Traverso, *Le passé*, p. 77.

by letting “the facts speak for themselves,” facts that they will have rigorously sought to establish—and nothing more. Such is their task. Neither a defence plea nor a prosecutor’s charge, nor the pronouncement of a verdict. These are not the business or the role of historians.

Perhaps it is not the historian draped in the prosecutor’s garb or the judge’s robe pronouncing a verdict that is so jarring or upsetting, but rather the tendency—inherent in accusations and defence – to retain only that which pleads in favour of one’s cause, to “lie for the good cause,” left and right, even if these are only lies of omission or the under-estimation of data that would weaken one’s argument.

Methodological objections this time: the accusation of accessory before the fact as a transgression of the first rule of historiography, which is to *historicize*, and as a recourse to two fallacious and indefensible paradigms

The first caveat: we must remind historians of ideas that the entities they synthesize are constructed and deconstructed over time, in unpredictable steps, as a function of no less unforeseen changes in the real world, with qualitative thresholds, “metamorphoses” and “transformations” to take stock of, all while engendering polarised variations that will become antagonistic. In a word: ideas are not entelechies possessing *ab ovo* the potential of their deployment.

Two matching pitfalls frequently compromise the accuracy of historians of ideas, and these are the price of their potential perspicacity and even of their (justly) *suspicious* character which leads them to elaborate genealogies of ideas in the middle- and the long-term.

1) The sophism of suspicion transferred to the origin.

In his 1952 book *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, which had a profound influence on Cold-War-era English-language historians of ideas, Jacob L. Talmon *goes back* from Stalin to Rousseau, via the romantic socialists, an operation of retrospective sequencing as odious to progressives as it is to the Rousseauists. For Talmon, *already* in the doctrines of a St-Simon,⁶⁵ whom he has in his sights, there are the essential ingredients of Bolshevism and Stalinism—no less than in Rousseau’s thought.⁶⁶

Historians of Talmon’s school, who go from “totalitarianism” back to certain of Rousseau’s ideas, to certain statist and authoritarian projects of St-Simon’s, to the romantic “idolization” of History, to “revolutionary messianism,” never, of course, say, in a summary polemic: Rousseau=gulag; but the transhistorical idealtype of “totalitarianism” claims to retrace little by little its origin, and it *transfers the suspicion* to that origin.⁶⁷ The topos of a sequence serves effectively to *construct a concept* in history, which is always to a certain point an act of *dehistoricizing*.

Historians ought to refuse to participate in the legal arguments that result from these huge sequential strides, that impute accessory before the fact to ways of thinking that originated *several generations* in advance. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy say it as well or better than I could:

Nazism is no more in Kant, in Fichte, in Hölderlin, or in Nietzsche (all of whom were thinkers solicited by Nazism)—it is, at the extreme, no more even in the musician Wagner than the Gulag is in Hegel or in Marx. Or the Terror, with all simplicity, in Rousseau.⁶⁸

65 On St-Simon as father of totalitarianism, see also: Georg Iggers, *The Cult of Authority: The Political Philosophy of the Saint-Simonians. A Chapter in the Intellectual History of Totalitarianism* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1958).

66 See, however, Marcel Gauchet’s praise of Talmon: *La condition historique. Entretiens avec François Azouvi et Sylvain Piron* (Paris: Stock, 2003), pp. 336-7.

67 An example of this approach: Ian Marejko, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la dérive totalitaire* (Lausanne: L’âge d’homme, 1984).

68 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. “The Nazi Myth,” trans. Brian Holmes, *Critical Inquiry* 16, 2 (1990): p. 265.

Neither Mussolini's regime nor Hitler's are *in* Maurice Barrès, bard of the Land and of the dead. If we can have a little fun (?) for a moment with counterfactual reasoning, there is no doubt that Nazism would have horrified that "delicate spirit" (who died in 1924)... Delicate, and eminently Germanophobic. *That* is not really the question, and as much should be obvious. No doubt, this acknowledgement does not in any way forbid historians of ideas from gradually moving from idea to idea to the *origins* or from following the sequences of influences, re-inscriptions and appropriations—that's what one would expect of them—so long as they're not going to hold a retroactive moral judgement as the final word on the matter, nor insinuate in a more than summary Platonism that the "final" outcome was *in the egg*, in the idea, Nazism in Fichte and the gulag in Marx.

All ideas undergo an inevitable alteration-attrition as they travel through space and time—this is the kind of objection we can make to any genealogy of ideas that moves with great strides, that *gradually brings suspicion back* to the origin—whether it claims to go from Herder and Nietzsche to *Mein Kampf*, or from St-Simon, Hegel and Marx to Joseph Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, via the impoverished corpus of "Marxism-Leninism," itself derived from the doctrinaire and nitpicky rehashings of Vladimir Ilyich.

Régis Debray formulates a sceptical rule: *all transmission is treason*, any way of thinking that ends up in the public sphere, that is absorbed into political struggles, that "takes hold" of the masses, rapidly becomes a generalized misinterpretation. *That's how it is*, and it's useless to want to revenge a "betrayed" system of thought (we're all familiar with the vain "returns" to Marx, "returns" to Freud, etc., etc.); there's no reason to weep over the inevitable. Plato, Platonism, Neoplatonism; Rousseau, Rousseauism, Jacobinism; Marx and Marxisms of all kinds: these are so many stories of misunderstanding, of attrition, of misinterpretation, of games of telephone, such that ideas surely "play a role in history," as we often repeat, but the ideas that "get cast" are never at the initial idea. Are they then avatars of that idea? No, they are more precisely attritions: everything starts mystical and ends political; everything starts subtle thought and ends simplism and slogan.

To which should be added, to increase our confusion, a famous paradox coined, as it happens, by Karl Marx: the people who make history do not know the history they are making, and at the same time the idea that they have of what must be done and of what they are doing, their goals, their myths and chimeras, will have a decisive impact on "real" history.

"All transmission is treason" applied to the Marx / Marxism translation.

David Lovell, among others, asks the question of the transmission/alteration of Marx to Lenin and from there to Stalin's Marxism-Leninism and its successors⁶⁹ and claims to evaluate to what extent the Soviet system was influenced by Marx's collectivist project, Lenin's interpretation of it, and the social and cultural heritage of Russia. Lovell reviews the contrary paradigms of those who think that Leninist doctrine and practice are legitimate interpretations of Marx's thought and those who insist on the rupture that Leninism represents, it being agreed in general that the latter, an ideology that made unlimited violence the means of taking and keeping power, had as its logic permanent terror (partisans of this view, jettisoning Lenin, want to "save" Marx, by opposition with those who want to implicate the author of *Capital* in all regimes, mass graves and camps included, that have claimed to follow him).

The fundamental question of mediology, developed by Régis Debray as the "science of transmission," is Marx's curious "destiny": between the man's rational and anti-religious work and Marxism turned religion, transmission betrays the original thought: "[I]s this misunderstanding the product of an unfortunate accident, or does it derive correspond to a logical necessity?"⁷⁰ "What demands explanation is

69 David W. Lovell, *From Marx to Lenin: An Evaluation of Marx's Responsibility for Soviet Authoritarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

70 Debray, *Critique of Political Reason*, p. 220.

that materialism itself as a State or Party doctrine has only functioned in explicitly religious forms.”⁷¹

It’s like magic[Debray jeers]. Enter a radical atheism. Exit a world religion. [...] More than ever before, the criticism of Marxist religion is now the prerequisite of all criticism. [...] For although illusion is present here in so far as communism denies being an illusion, it is also present wherever illusion is refused citizenship because men forget that it is the condition of existence of Cities.⁷²

2) Complementary sophism: the slippery slope.

In my essay *L’immunité de la France envers le fascisme: un demi-siècle de polémiques historiennes*, I lay out the various arguments of French historians against Zeev Sternhell’s theses on the French origins of fascism: Sternhell, by returning to the 1880s, seems to think in terms of a “slippery slope”—the critique of democratic mores could be partially justified and may be well-intended, let’s assume, but gradually, the “revolt” of these disparate thinkers was “directed against the entirety of the values bequeathed from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.”⁷³ The result is that “all the thinkers who have critically examined the ‘religion of progress’ or abstract universalism,”⁷⁴ Pierre-André Taguieff notes in protest, are thrown unceremoniously by Sternhell into the prefascist abyss.

I will take the risk of explaining here what so fundamentally grates on Sternhell’s critics: they detect at bottom a constant tendency toward *Stalinist fallacies*, judgements by amalgam, by retrospective anachronism and by “objective culpabilities.” This method amounts to installing a tribunal of thought, Taguieff reproaches, a tribunal destined to judge the thinkers of the past in retrospect: a flagrant sin of anachronism.⁷⁵ Taguieff adds that in Sternhell’s recent book, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, “Sternhell gives a caricatured illustration of a polemical history of political ideas subjected without nuance to the gaze of the supreme ideological judge that is the activist historian. The history of political thought is thus reduced to a game of massacres.”

In this regard, the entire Sternhellian undertaking is sometimes declared untenable in its central concept: “Teleological, the notion of *prefascism* is, in itself, absurd,” Pascal Ory writes.⁷⁶ The notion implies that the anti-liberal and nationalist ideas of 1880 *could only* lead to the fascism of 1930. Otherwise, we can only label them “prefascist” by employing an anachronistic paralogism.

Thus Zeev Sternhell deals with the case—among others—of the Belgian leader and political thinker Henrik De Man, as if De Man’s attitude during the Nazi occupation (he rallied, in his 1940 *Manifeste du Parti ouvrier belge*, to the New Order) was already fatally inscribed in his famous book *Zur Psychologie des Sozialismus*, published in 1926.⁷⁷ Jacques Julliard denounces this interpretation as a complementary fallacy of “regressive causality.” For Sternhell, fascism’s path to the far left was cleared by the “anti-materialist revision of Marxism,” to which he chiefly attaches the names of Georges Sorel and De Man. To what extent, however, is “materialism” at the heart of the heritage of the Enlightenment, and in what way does any critique of supposed Marxian materialism lead to fascism? Sternhell’s explanation rests unperturbed on the slippery-slope argument: “All anti-materialism is not fascism, but fascism constitutes a variety of anti-materialism and channels all of the essential currents of anti-materialism in the 20th century”—but is that

71 Untranslated in Verso edition. See Régis Debray, *Critique de la raison politique, ou l’inconscient religieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp. 323–4. —*Trans.*

72 Debray, *Critique of Political Reason*, pp. 218–9.

73 *Droite révolutionnaire*, 23.

74 Taguieff, Pierre-André. *Les contre-révolutionnaires. Le progressisme entre illusion et imposture*, Paris: Denoël, 2007, p. 322.

75 *Les contre-révolutionnaires*, *ibid.*

76 Pascal Ory, *Du fascisme* (Paris: Perrin, 2003), p. 48

77 Henri De Man, *Zur Psychologie des Sozialismus* (Jena: Diederichs, 1926). ► English version, tr. by Eden and Cedar Paul, *The Psychology of Socialism* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1928).

really a tenable position?

So-called “prefascism,” Serge Bernstein writes, will always be missing the *two key ideas that define political fascism*: the primacy of an ideology that attempts to organize the masses into a permanent *Totale Mobilmachung* in peacetime and to press citizens’ entire lives into the service of the state, into the service of what Eric Voegelin designates a *Realissimum*,⁷⁸ and that plans to mould an entirely new people by abolishing all pluralism. This objection is important if its goal is to signal that before the total war of 1914–1918 and before the Bolshevik Revolution, these two “ideas,” joined in a *clear and distinct project*, were not situated outside of the *thinkable*, but at least merely emerge in the implicit state of a repudiation of corrupting parliamentary democracy, indissociable from the “palingenetic” exacerbation of nationalism, and of the conception of a nation bound together under a Leader, from which parties and divisive factors (the anti-patriotic socialist movement foremost among them) would be eliminated. We can attest these elements in the writings of a Maurice Barrès, for example. All of this precedes the Great War—but the two explicit “projects” that would determine and make the *means* to be taken plausible are the products of an awareness drawn from these events—and did not, moreover, transform into programs and goals to attain until fascism (namely, Italian fascism) took power.

Sternhell’s teleological categories “prefascism” and “fascism” lend themselves, from this perspective, to the critiques they have incurred. The history of ideas, no less than “factual” history, to be rigorous and credible, must constantly *periodize* and *make topographies of* what, in and for a particular conjuncture, is hegemonic, thinkable, sayable, marginal, or not-yet-said, not-yet-thought, *noch nicht Gesagtes*, even as it ultimately seeks to diachronically construct an *idealtyp*e that will itself be atemporal.

Finally: a rule of methodological scepticism for the historian of ideas.

Historians of ideas, then, who would shrink before the historicization and relativization of the supposedly inviolable values of their time and place, who would believe that something like truth had finally been attained in their time in the human and social sciences, who would believe in a contemporary *normality*, who would think that, as though by accident, the world had finally started to adhere to “true” values and had decisively progressed in truth and reason in their epoch, which would enable them to judge with a condescending detachment the errors, chimeras and myths of the past by the yardstick of a better-buttressed knowledge—such historians should change professions.

Only a well-considered Pyrrhonism and a certain respect—at least an observation without arrogance of the past’s human error—is becoming of the historian of ideas. Scepticism is not nihilism. It does not lead one to conclude that all ideas are equal, that every one does its time before becoming devalued, that they all delude and lead to catastrophe. But one must perform the history of ideas without being *in the service of* the exaltation or the approbation and legitimation of the idea under study, nor, if one definitely does not like the ideology in question, in the no less vain service of its demonization and the *ex post facto* demonstration of its “dangers.”

The sceptical attitude does not boil down to aboulie doubt or to a jaded, fatigued relativism: it confers on the historian of ideas an honourable and “salutary” civic role: inciting contemporaries to look at the course of the world with a sober eye, “*mit nüchternen Augen*,” not to cede to the illusions and chimeras of grand systems, while resisting the doxa of the moment, what the French call “*la pensée unique*,” to strive to “think for oneself” even as one’s work as an historian demonstrates how problematic and never fully granted such an effort is.

78 See Eric Voegelin. *Die politische Religionen* (Wien: Bermann-Fischer, 1938). Reissue: München: 1993, ed. Peter J. Opitz with an important “Nachwort.” ➤ *Political Religions*, trans. T.J. DiNapoli and E.S. Easterly III (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1986). Cf Michael Ley and Julius H. Schöps, ed., *Der Nationalsozialismus als Politische Religion* (Bodenheim: Philo, 1997), and Hermann Lübke and Władysław Bartoszewski, *Heilervartung und Terror: Politische Religionen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1995).