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LEGITIMATE ILLUSIONS: A CRITIQUE OF THE CONCEPT OF HISTORICAL IDENTITY

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This essay questions the natural use of historical identity for political legitimation. Though it recognizes that history is supposed to have a legitimating function, it analyzes what historical knowledge actually does in contemporary society. This analysis brings out fatal ambivalences inherent in the concepts of both identity and history. It argues that historical knowledge is illusory because, as the product of technical expertise, it occludes basic, existential realities. It reveals history as the symbolic reflection, if not the ideological mask, of alienating social conditions and morbid cultural values. In conclusion, the essay proposes that human sociability should be fostered not by deceptive historical identities but by existential priorities.

Introduction: Historical identity—a symptom of historicized consciousness

The concept of historical identity expresses the predominant function of historical knowledge in contemporary society: to tell us who we are. In explaining how the world got to be the way it is, history tells us how we got to be the way we are. According to history, what we did and how we were before naturally shape what we do and how we are now: it's simple cause and effect. This natural cognitive reflex ($A^{(t1)} = A^{(t2)}$) is the identity principle (A = A) in historicized form. Historical consciousness and its epic, historicist constructions—from Herder to Spengler and beyond—employ organicist, biologistic metaphors to imply that history is both the natural habitat of the *homo sapiens* and the natural matrix of individuals, nations and states. Naturally, therefore, the identity principle also operates as common-sense, especially now, in this historicized world, where a sense of history is the most common sense.

The world, and with it human consciousness, has become historicized because historical events dense with ontological significance (e.g. World War I, the Jewish Genocide, the threat of nuclear apocalypse, the lunar-landings, genetic engineering) have shifted the very principle of history. Symptomatic of this predicament is a statement such as: 'to remember after Auschwitz is different from remembering before Auschwitz. Something has changed: we cannot "do history" as usual' (Hartman 1996, 136). The ever-present threat of nuclear destruction, heightened by

global terrorism, means that the old continuities disappear, humanity itself becomes antiquated, and the 'epoch in which epochs changed is over' (Anders 1986, 20). This history-shift is so traumatic that the cultural memory is still nursing its psychological scars, is still making the past ever present through the eidetic recall of the traumatic events it has gone through (cf. Lowenthal 1998, 74). This recall is so compulsive, it induces the characteristic psychopathology of historicized life: the past is always so insistently present that the present is naturally apprehended in historical terms as always past. What it all comes down to is this: in a historicized world the historicized mind automatically remembers first, rather than recollects later. In a historicized world history, therefore, happens first, beforehand: it is not what we realize has happened afterwards. History is revealed as the repository of volatile, promiscuous meanings it always was. As Valéry remarks, it provides examples of everything and so justifies anything, which makes it a dangerously unstable compound (Valéry 1960a, 935). History's grand narrative disintegrates into all kinds of micro-histories and historical sub-sub-disciplines serving multifarious agendas. History is now constantly on tap as a natural resource, deposited over thousands of years (like oil, gas, or coal), and there to be exploited, customized, commodified, or—constructed.

This instability is symptomatic of the historicized world, conscious of how history shapes historical understanding itself. Individuals, nations, and states have now a historical hyper-consciousness to cope with. Aware not just of what they have done in history but of what history has done to them, theirs is a historicized, historical consciousness. Consequently, people naturally, self-consciously construct for themselves the history they identify with, the history that identifies them. They assemble the most appropriate historical data to correct an unsatisfactory historical reality, the corrective being implemented as a history-making event. Traditional historians' misgivings that the self-conscious construction of histories relativizes historical truth are groundless. This is precisely where the identity principle, the 'supreme law of thinking' [*das oberste Denkgesetz*], comes in (Heidegger 2002, 9). It enforces history as much as history enforces it. Far more effectively than any historical research criteria, it guarantees historical veracity in formal, logical terms. But then, historically speaking, it has always done so. Its basis is Vico's basic, identitary premiss:

> this world of nations has certainly been made by men and its guise must be found in the modifications of our own human mind. And history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also narrates them (Vico 1984, 104; §349).

Because history and the identity principle interlock, the concept of historical identity is compelling—particularly since personal identity is made problematic by a world that keeps historicizing itself. One major historicizing agency is global capitalism and its ethos of fluidity, flexibility, and short-term aims. It's 'conditions of time [...] have created a conflict between character and experience, the

experience of disjointed time threatening the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives.' The result: uncertainty is 'woven into the everyday practices of vigorous capitalism. Instability is meant to be normal' (Sennett 1999, 31). Typically, therefore, history supplies compensation. Though it deals with change, it offers in principle a fixed point of self-orientation. It organizes the space around itself symbolically, in terms of homogenous, identitary constructions (e.g. century, country, class) (de Certeau 1975, 103, 353-4). It employs a 'semantics of transcendance' that locates it 'in a place that one can do nothing about, but which affords [it] the power to enact its overall accumulative functions' (Cohen 1988, 28). What history thus most effectively organizes and enacts, are identities. Historical truth is predicated on identicality: history, before all else, represents how things were the way they were. Identity is the ideal form of historical self-restitution in a constantly changing, self-historicizing world. Hence history's legitimation function. But if the synergy between history and identity collapses, the concept of historical identity collapses too. The historicizing mentality will have been a delusion and history will have produced mere illusions of legitimacy: legitimate illusions.

Historical identity: ideational and existential aspects

The principle of identity is deceptive. It dissembles by pretending everything is the same. It can mean the relationship one has with oneself, of being self-identical [*selber dasselbe*]; parity or similarity with others [*Gleichheit*]; or belonging together [*Zusammengehören*] (Heidegger 2002, 9ff.). Further, it splits along a logical ideational and a contingent existential axis. On the logical ideational axis, the historian constructing historical ideal-types (e.g. "revolution") must decide what makes one revolution (1848) the same as another (1917) (i.e. what puts it in the same conceptual class), their parity in terms of historical significance, and what, when taken together, they signify (e.g. the rôle of revolutions in making Europe what it is). On the existential axis, however, these factors operate quite differently. They are a self-interrogative. What in all my various commitments ensures a sense of personal consistency? How do I approach the many different others [*autrui*] I encounter in the world? What makes me feel alienated or accepted? Defining identity, analyzing why it makes everything the same, requires discrimination. It is always necessary to know if it is meant existentially or ideationally, contingently or logically.

History is just as deceptive. The same word covers both its existential and ideational dimensions. History as personal commitment through action is existentially constitutive. But the existential significance of an action is always open to subsequent revision by means of the ideal-types used to identify its historical context. The existential and ideational dimensions are not the same, however much common collective terms such as "tradition", "culture", "heritage",

or "humanity" conceptually cover both. No-one lives on the transcendental plane of historical truth, even though their unprecedented action appears to make history. Braudel makes this clear when he insists that 'the present should not be judged on the scale of individual lives, these routine segments, so thin, insignificant, and translucent, that individual existences represent', since civilizations and all collective constructions are on a scale that requires a quite different type of measurement (Braudel 1984, 309). But this split between the personal, existential and the historical, ideational dimension usually goes unnoticed. In this historicized world history as ideation takes precedence over present existence: 'Man is never the first man but begins his life on a certain level of accumulated past' (Ortega y Gasset 1962, 81). History's precedence has to be ideational; it can never be immediately experiential. It thus has an in-built, ontological advantage, as suggested by its most radical formulation:

> *man* [...] *has no nature, what he has is . . . history*', and its equally radical corollary: 'history is the systematic science of that radical reality, my life (Ortega y Gasset 1962, 217, 223).

Moreover, history's ideational precedence is reinforced by the institutions that frame human existence (state, nation, society, religion, etc.) that exist for themselves only as historical ideations, perpetuating themselves as historical agencies through the identitary logic [*logique identitaire*] inherent in society's self-reproduction (Castoriadis 1975, 284-5, 311).

Between them, therefore, the concepts of identity and history offer ample scope for category errors. Existential attitudes expand into ideational forms (as, e.g., in the history of mentalities); mental constructs reduce to contingent phenomena (through, e.g., the psychologistic explanations of social or political history). In the present historically hyperconscious situation historical interest is indiscriminate. The result ought to be existentially illusory. Historical identity, the relationship between one's self-understanding and one's understanding of history, that seems logically binding, ought to be tenuous. And it would be, were it not for a form of existence that combines existential identity and historical ideation: the professional, academic historian in person. In this historicized world the historian is the existential paradigm. Since, in self-consciously constructing the history that identifies them, everyone becomes his or her own historian, everyone needs an example to identify with.

The resulting convergence between personal existence and historical ideation, underpinned by the promiscuity of historical methods, endorsed by academic authority, produces historical knowledge and truth in all their heterogeneous forms. With there being so many different types of historical interest, historical identity comes in many varieties. Additionally, the academic has the social advantage. The academic is the expert, – the 'information-engineer', the 'resources-manager' [*Besteller des Bestandes*], the administrator of society's symbolic capital (Toulmin

1992, 104; Heidegger 1967a, 26). He or she is authorized to 'speak for reality, about and of reality, while conserving a "post of speaking" (as expert) that cannot be challenged except by [his or her] identical other'—i.e. another historian (Cohen 1993, 23). Moreover, in the human sciences academic discourse tends to be historicizing discourse: academic expertise is essentially historical expertise. It relegates the present moment where one actually lives and breathes to a narrow margin of being that, pending its historicization, remains officially unintelligible.

However, even though the academic may deny it, the split between scientific ideation [*Wissenschaft*] and existential self-reflection [*Besinnung*] persists. In denying it, his or her very scholasticism is a 'systematic principle of error' (Heidegger 1967b, 59-62; Bourdieu 1997, 63). It leaves historical knowledge and its derivative historical identities unstable. The instability affects their very foundations. It compromises Vico's attempt to combine immutable, ideational (Aristotelian) truth with existentially contingent, empirical (Baconian) certainty by means of a 'common, mental language' and the idea of divine providence (Vico 1984, 67-8, 102; §§162-3, 342-3). *The New Science* would explain 'the particular ways' in which institutions come into being, these origins being 'confirmed by the eternal properties [the institutions] preserve which *could not be what they are* if the institutions *had not come into being as they did*'. Here the italicized identitary formulations bind the contingent and the transcendental factors together. The only place where these factors could co-exist is the academic text with its 'common mental language'. The academic text makes ideational identity possible: wherever ideational identity is formulated it becomes *ipso facto* academic. Contrary to Braudel's idea, Vico would force a similar academically indispensable, but illusory identification on the existentially situated reader: he 'will experience in his mortal body a divine pleasure as he contemplates in the divine ideas this world of nations in all the extent of its places, times, and varieties' (Vico 1984, 103; §§345-6).

Ideational identity as an ideological construct

Elaborating a factual basis to show how things got to be the way they are, history is a 'truth-deficient' form of enquiry, though it takes a Hegelian perspective, as in the *Phenomenology of Mind*, to see it. Though certainty [*Gewißheit*] produces unlimited, infinitely rich, and the most veracious [*wahrhafteste*] knowledge, it affords merely the most abstract and deficient truth [*die abstrakteste und ärmste* Wahrheit], because it contains only things being the way they are [*allein das* Sein *der Sache*] (Hegel 1979, 82). By contrast, in Classical Platonic or Aristotelian terms, truth could not be contemplated, much less expressed in a 'common mental language': the highest knowledge belonged to few philosophers. Philosophical truth resists history: the thinking invested in the Classical texts dwells in a form of non-time, its axioms are not invalidated by

historical developments, its very existence is temporally and spatially discontinuous (Arendt 1978, 210-11; Deleuze, Guattari 1991, 36, 58-9; Badiou 1989, 13). Historical truth is promiscuous, offering everyone something to identify with. Sometime or other, everyone comes to the mortuary of history to reclaim 'those with whom he has a heartfelt relationship' [*die verwandten Toten seines Herzens*] (Richter 1970, 1016). However, in Classical terms, a truth accessible to everyone is a sophistical illusion because it is an identitary construct: it cannot be more than a 'likeness' (Plato 2002a, 330-3; 235A-D).

The synergy between history and identity is problematic. Historical identity is an unstable, illusory compound of heterogeneous elements. It appears natural and persuasive only because the historicized world is the same. The historicized world projects history in its own image because history explains how things become the way they are. Sameness is the crucial operative principle of ideation in historical understanding: to track the historical development of, e.g., a state or a nation implies that essentially it remains the same throughout its development (Popper 1974, 31-2). The particularities of its development make it what it is: they define its transcendent self-identity.

Self-identical sameness [*Selbigkeit*] is, in any case, the hallmark of academic knowledge, a highly technical form of knowledge that traps existential reality in disciplinary schemata (Heidegger 2002, 13; Heidegger 1967b, 48-9). Each discipline focuses on its self-same object, distilled by its own technology from the segment of reality it deals with (e.g. sociology with society, psychology with the mind). For the historical sciences this disciplinary self-identity has a particular, reflexive consequence. History, being the science of everything, has no specific object. The effect of the disciplinary ethos is to make everything the same: it represents reality in terms of its disciplinary sameness [*Selbigkeit*]. Whatever topics it deals with, in constantly defaulting to sources, origins, precedents, legacies, identities, or traditions, it perpetuates the same old thing [*dasselbe*]. This makes it readily available as a resource for identity-formation: after all sameness [*Gleichheit*; *Selbigkeit*] is a precondition of identity (A=A). Also it leaves it open to ideological exploitation. It enforces reactive-passive behaviour (i.e. who we are, is always what we have already been). It anaesthetizes our innate, existential vigilance. It assures us that, whatever happens, things remain the same, – the way things are, reflecting the way they were, and everything understandable in the same old way.

What history is, is, therefore, far less important than what it does. In a historicized world, history imposes identity formations. It substitutes for the real world its identical historical sign, as in the following typical cases. (A) Be it in accounting for the past or for the present, history substitutes a self-consciously constructed, comprehensively rationalized (i.e. academically truthful [*wahrhaft*]) illusion of reality for the routine environment of ordinary experience [*Lebenswelt*] (Lowenthal 1993, 234). (B) History's projection of illusory sameness, its passing particular certainties off as unchanging truth, suppresses a further axiom of

Classical epistemology: that the purely human world with its phenomenal mutability is not to be fixed in language to become an unchanging object of knowledge (Plato 2002b, 185-91, 438D-440E). (C) History produces identitary effects to pin down the existentially illusory notion of historical identity. Its tactic is to persuade you (i.e. the individual, nation, or state) you belong more in an academically "finished" reality-substitute of continuities and identities than in the fractured and delapidated social environment, the actual, true face of this historicized world, it makes you resent. In these cases cognitive scope comes second to ideational function: history operates ideologically. In the historicized world, *history is the ideology*.

History's ideological subversion of existential self-interrogation

Historical identity thus undermines the self-interrogation that comes with the existential aspect of identity. With its identitary effects, history blocks your own self-determination. As a brief review of its key social functions confirms, history knows already who you are:

(1) History exemplifies socially affirmative thinking, whatever its political or social slant. Affirmative thinking designates the way culture ideationally compensates for the wide discrepancies between actual social existence and social aspirations. It uncouples present knowledge from present action, by suffusing the satisfaction of human needs with a utopian aura. The idealistic character of affirmative culture thus both justifies the existence of things as they are [*Rechtfertigung der bestehenden Daseinsform*], and acts as a reminder [*Erinnerung*] of how things could ideally be. It tempers resignation towards the persistence of the same old thing, with a real desire for total historical transformation (– hence its totalitarian susceptibilities!) (Marcuse 1973, 66-9).

However, in a historicized world, affirmative culture *a priori* endorses a collective memory [*Erinnerung*] of how things once actually were. Historicized consciousness affirms an idealized past for a necessitous present to identify with. Cultural heritage is the form affirmative culture assumes in a historicized world. It supplies the ideological foundation for a collective sense of belonging [*Zusammengehören*] in social, political, or national terms. It comes with a ubiquitous museum-culture ('95 percent of existing museums postdate the Second World War'), itself symptomatic of the historicized consciousness behind it (Lowenthal 1998, 3). It turns the entire social environment into a totally comprehensive, historical text—as a recent UK government report affirms: 'it is a collective memory, containing an infinity of stories, some ancient, some recent: stories written in stone, brick, wood, glass, steel; stories inscribed in the field patterns, hedgerows, designed landscapes and other features of the countryside' (DCMS 2001, 7).

Historicized consciousness thus produces a social semiotics that erases the difference between personal, existential interests and the state's transcending

ideological objectives. It makes the historic environment 'central to how we see ourselves and to our identity as individuals, communities and as a nation', – 'a physical record of what our country is, how it came to be' (DCMS 2001, 7). And the cultural heritage managers themselves follow the government line: 'the historic environment is what generations of people have made of the places in which they lived. It is all about us' (English Heritage 2000, 1). Nothing could be more ideologically affirmative than the political objective of 'making everyone feel comfortable with their historic environment'. The brute, economic value of the tourist and leisure industries, if not the promotion of social cohesion and national prestige, mean that 'achieving a higher level of involvement and engagement [in it] must therefore be a high priority for the [heritage] sector as a whole' (DCMS 2001, 7, 25). Heritage nostalgia makes the perfect cover for economic modernization.

(2) History compensates for the loss of reality in postmodern society. That loss is itself a historicized condition. After all, only a historicized culture can call itself "postmodern". Present reality proves elusive, not just because it presents itself as past, not just because it substitutes its reality for a historical sign of itself, but also because of its accelerating, technological tempo. A world constantly historicizing itself technologically has nothing but its historical resources to draw on. The historicized world is not just heterogeneous in its interests and values, but also asynchronously heterogeneous: the latest thing turns out to be the same as the same old thing. Nowhere is this more the case than in the historical disciplines themselves. The latest computer-modelling technology recreates three-dimensional models of (e.g.) medieval monasteries. The latest internet sites maintained by libraries are virtual repositories of ancient archives: you can electronically "turn" the pages of the virtual book just as you once turned the same old pages of the same old book. Thus, traditional, academic history is refunctioned in the postmodern image: it too becomes a technology, —a technology of technologies, managed by information engineers (Davies 2006, 134,137,152).

By becoming a technology for producing identities, history ensures that everything gets historical back-up, that everything is produced the way it was. This is what happens. Traditional objectivity becomes geared to identity production, since, for a destabilized world, the identity principle (A = A) epitomizes stability. To this the 'stable bodies' of 'agreed historical knowledge' add further ballast, particularly since, as public knowledge, they obligate society—i.e. historians, teachers, curators, heritage managers, etc. —constantly to maintain them (Appleby et al. 1995, 254; Elton 1969, 80; Davies 2006, 165). Then disciplinary practices—e.g. habitual recourse to conventional ideal-typical constructs; application of objectively neutral, technical terminology; peer-review monitoring of research publication; keeping up with the latest scholarship—enforce cognitive regularities that, constituting the 'iron foundation' of the discipline, guarantee its self-consistent thought-style (Fleck 1983, 46). Lastly, *faute de mieux*, history's multifarious "stories" always have identitary constructs available. Historical

narrative doesn't work logically: it absorbs self-contradictory content because it remains formally self-identical (Schmidt-Biggemann 1991, 27). The outcome of this technical process, historical identity, is hardly anything natural: it's more a slick, synthetic product, like polyurethane.

(3) Historical identity is the expression of morbid culture: 'anything associated with the double: shadows, reflections, mirror-images, is a reference to death' (Morin 1976, 189). The past, of course, is the province of the dead: historical accounts are 'the equivalent of cemeteries in towns, affirming the presence of the dead amidst the living' (de Certeau 1975, 103). History's ideological obsession with identities is symptomatic of the morbid psychopathology the Narcissus myth exemplifies. It lends morbid self-fascination social credence.

The historical identity that is meant to tell us how we got to be who we are, actually proves self-alienating. The apparently edifying, humanist conception of history—whereby "man" makes history and history makes "man", because history is naturally human and human nature inevitably historical—mutates into the disorientating hall-of-mirrors it always was. The implications are spelled out by Hannah Arendt: since 'all the processes of the earth and the universe [reveal] themselves as [...] man-made', history negates itself: 'these processes, after having devoured [...] the solid objectivity of the given, [end] by rendering meaningless the one over-all process which originally was conceived to give meaning to them' (Arendt 1993, 89). The historicized world, run by the history technology, proves fatally mesmerizing. It ends up reproducing itself in its own image. 'Illusion is the fundamental rule': reality becomes its own simulacrum. A historicized world replaces the contingencies of the real world with its identical, historical sign (Baudrillard 1999, 15, 42; Baudrillard 1981, 11).

With its obsession with identities, the historicized world creates a nightmarish scenario of self-encounter. Historical understanding becomes exclusively self-referential: a world created by the human mind presents itself as a mirror-image of the mind that made it (Valéry 1960b, 1059). A historicized solipsism displaces immediate contact with reality with fatal results. The problematic distance between perceiving subject and perceived object collapses totally. What appears to be self-evident "objective knowledge" is an illusory, narcissistic identity construction. It represents the death of meaning since, as the Narcissus myth shows, the only possible outcome is the death of both the signifier (Narcissus' identical self-image) and the signified (Narcissus himself). In a historicized world, traumatized by its own violent self-image, death is the ultimate identity construct, the same thing it ultimately all comes down to.

Finally, (4) history symbolically reinforces the sameness that dominates a society of mass consumerism. History, containing everything and concerning everyone, is produced by media corporations as an object of mass-consumption in all its commodified varieties (e.g. academic monograph, popular biography, reproduction antique, museum-souvenir, TV documentary, Hollywood film). The

process of commodity production is a historical process: human action as human labour (be it intellectual or physical) transforms the world both through the commodities it produces and the forms of organization the labour-process takes. The material objects human existence requires need replacing and renewing: the market-system constantly advertizes the latest thing, be it the latest Ford or the latest Sugababes CD. But lateness is a historical category. The latest thing soon becomes the same old thing: a market seeking the always the latest output intentionally relegates its products to the past. It needs to make them history. The major corporations in the global economy (as, e.g., in Beijing or Shanghai) reorganize the world around them in their own image, imprinting on the other environment the same brand-logos (e.g. Starbucks, Macdonalds, Lufthansa), consigning cultural authenticity to history, and making history by obliterating difference.

History might well show how a world such as this got to be the way it is, but only because it is a 'referential simulation' of the capitalist production process, an identity formation generated by that production process itself (Baudrillard 1985, 75). It runs on the identical identitary logic. The same time-concept—linear, neutral, acquisitive—creates interest and value for historical objects and financial products (e.g. investments, mortgages, savings-plans) alike. The same commodity thinking that reduces social relationships to economic relationships in the production of finished commodities, enforces social belief in the objective finality of historical fact [*factum*] (Bloch 1979, 329-30). So history too is propelled by the same self-reproductive drive, the latest revisions of its topics intentionally rendering existing interpretations obsolete. It historicizes the world not least because it historicizes itself: it keeps reproducing itself in its own historicizing identity. It's thus a discipline, a form of thought-determinism [*Bestimmung des Geistes*], that 'harmonizing with the overall tendency in society, makes taboo anything that does not persistently reproduce the same old thing [*das je Gegebene*]' (Adorno 2003, 496).

Conclusion: the existential subversion of history's "identity ideology"

What history does, promotes conformity. It closes down rather than opens up; it neutralizes new forms of signification (Greimas 1970, 110–111). Its continuities, necessities, and identities occlude a present that's already existentially obscure. That's why it is necessary to differentiate between the identity principle and the self-identity question. From this standpoint there's no history without human existence: existence always 'comes before' history (Levinas 1972, 60). History might surreptitiously take the logical principle for the existential answer: the Delphic injunction "know yourself "(A = ?) is not the principle of identity (A = A). Certainly this latter proposition, as formulated by Parmenides, being 'generative of reason and systematic thought', constitutes 'western criteria of intelligibility'

(Heidegger 2002, 14; Steiner 1997a, 353). Logically, it embeds existence in knowledge capacity: thinking = being. Existentially, however, one knows who one is only through cultivating a point of difference in oneself: the self is not all the same [*das Selbe ist nicht das Gleiche*] (Heidegger 2002, 35). As Hannah Arendt argues, this internal process of self-differentiation is crucial: so,

> for myself, articulating this being-conscious-of-myself, I am inevitably *two-in-one*—which incidentally is the reason why the fashionable search for identity is futile and our modern identity crisis could be resolved only by losing consciousness (Arendt 2003, 184).

One won't know oneself as one is, unless one sees oneself as another, unless one can live with oneself as with another. This other that one is, is the question. It's the ever-present interlocutor with whom one thinks, given that thinking is 'a silent inner conversation of the soul with itself' (Plato 2002a, 440-41; 263E); the pursuit of knowledge is the most effective means of self-discovery (Plato 1999, 321-3; 86B-C); and quarrelling with the other that one is, is much more distressing than quarrelling with others. Self-consciousness necessarily implies conscience, responsibility towards others, as Socrates insists:

> I [...] should rather [...] have any number of people disagreeing with me and contradicting me than that I [being one] should have internal discord and contradiction in my own single self (Plato 2001, 381; 482B-C; cf. Arendt 2003, 181ff.).

The existence of others is integral to the existential sense of self. The world may run itself on identitary structures; the world one lives in [*Lebenswelt*] is sustained by a 'plurality' of different human beings (Arendt 2003, 184). With "you" already programmed into "my" consciousness, historical understanding only works because it's like understanding someone different (Simmel 1999, 161-2). So taking historical self-identity to express oneself, negates plurality and difference. This has two fatal consequences. First, it drastically diminishes real experience of the world. 'The subject, deprived of interior alterity, locks itself into infinite identity': it inhabits a technically "finished", absolute reality-substitute, inexchangeable for any other, that can only ever become what it is (Baudrillard 1999, 72). Historical identity asserts itself with fundamentalist conviction: it leaves one indelibly marked by one's past and the stories one tells about it. Legitimated by academic expertise, it subjugates society to the same old thing. It provokes atavism: it comes with the musty, nostalgic aroma of heritage and tradition; its rhetoric is redolent of psychological and political domination. Nationalism, its usual expression, 'is a sort of madness, a virulent infection edging the species towards mutual massacre' (Said 2001, 575; Steiner 1997b, 322). Of course, historical identity is irresistibly persuasive. How can it not be? It offers a pseudo-transcendental fix for contingent, problematic existence: it's quasi-religious faith hallucinating on scientific certainty.

Second, historical identity absolves the present of responsibility for the world. It ignores the basic existential fact that our world is never ours. It was created by

others before us who could not know who we would be; we relinquish it to unknown others for them to live in as well. Phenomenologically speaking, the other [*autrui*] does not exist in the same universe of thinking [*le même univers de pensée*] as I do. Conversely, sharing a common ontological foundation, the other offers a perspective on being that remains essentially invisible to me. The empirical historical world that we can see and apparently share, is a nebulous, impersonal, temporal succession of promiscuous things and people that seems historically coherent only because they represent merely different aspects of the same thing [*différences* [...] *d'un même quelque chose*] (Merleau-Ponty 1995, 110, 114, 116). Historical identity obscures human interests. With its 'pure signification', the visibility of what already exists immobilizes the inherent, dialectical fluidity of existential thinking and its invisible, incessant self-questioning. Critical reason realizes that too. As Kant observes, locking existence now into the identical image of its precursors is a 'crime against humanity', since it blocks the innate human tendency for autonomous self-development. To impose past obligations on future descendents, is (he says) simply 'not permissible', since it means 'transgressing the sacred rights of humanity' (Kant 1982, 57–58). It denies human beings their ideational capacity to refuse ready-made realities as well as their right to legislate for their future self-improvement (Scheler 1978, 52ff., 88ff.; Kant 1967, 84ff.). Ecologically, moreover, identity fixations obstruct a human species-essential requirement: diversity—not just 'the genetic and experiential diversity of persons, but also [...] the flexibility and "preadaptation" necessary for unpredictable change' (Bateson 2000, 503).

Becoming fatally engrossed in illusory reflections of the past [*vorstellen*] won't ever tell us who we are. We'll discover that through our innate predisposition to think [*denken*], through apprehending what the future holds in store for us [*vor-denken*] (Heidegger 2002, 20, 30, 54). That requires a better recognition of existential, human interests—not statesmen, aided and abetted by history information-engineers, hell-bent on flogging us the bric-à-brac laid out on their 'shop counter of historical representations' (Heidegger 2002, 58).

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