

### **Should history be rewritten in line with modern day views of human rights?**

In his seminal novel *The Go-Between*, L.P. Hartley wrote, “*the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there*”<sup>1</sup>, This famous phrase has almost become a truism to many historians as they recognise that individuals in times past thought and behaved in ways which may be difficult to understand if viewed from a modern perspective. Throughout history, most people came into the world inculcated with a set of assumptions about morality which are an anathema to the principles of human rights.

The modern preoccupation with evaluating the past by the standards of the present is what led Herbert Butterfield to pen his famous critique *The Whig Interpretation of History*. In it Butterfield assailed historians for presenting history as simply a journey from a repressive past into an enlightened liberal present whilst denigrating anyone who deviated from this path, castigating them for being on the “wrong side of history”. Butterfield criticised this approach for being ahistorical, for oversimplifying events, and for alienating the historian from his subject of study. Instead, he argued that “*real historical understanding is not achieved by subordinating the past to the present, but rather by making the past our present and attempting to see life with the eyes of another century than our own*”.<sup>2</sup> It is submitted that this is a much more perspicacious approach to history than that offered by the human rights view.

A human right is a moral and legal entitlement that a person possesses simply by virtue of being human. The fundamental moral claim of human rights is that they are both *inalienable* and *universal*; meaning that they cannot be taken away and that they apply always and everywhere.

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<sup>1</sup> L.P. Hartley, *The Go-between*, (Bury St Edmunds: 1953) p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, (London: 1968) p.16.

This presents a problem for historians because for most of human history societies valued the collective above the individual, the spiritual over the rational, and the particular rather than the universal. It is these presuppositions that have led to some of humanity's greatest achievements as well as its gravest atrocities. If history were to be rewritten to comply with the ethical claims of human rights, the vast majority of characters from the past would be found wanting.

The great liberal historian Lord Acton was of the view that history should be written in line with individual rights for he believed that "*it is the office of historical science to maintain morality as the sole impartial criterion of men and things*"<sup>3</sup>, this view grants historians the licence to pass judgement on the actions of the past. The problem with this approach is that given that moral views change with succeeding generations, it encourages the self-congratulatory belief that each generation is more moral than the last. Humanity will be unable to understand the past, if history is simply a justification of the present.

The problem is compounded by the fact that human rights lend themselves to a complacent moral finality, an assumption that they provide the answer to any ethical dilemma and thus cannot be improved upon. This belief is seductive but mistaken. For example, it is entirely conceivable to imagine a future in which it is agreed that the consumption of meat is unethical because it is in breach of animal rights: *are we to be condemned because we enjoy a chicken korma every now and then?*

If we judge the past by the standards of the present there is nothing to stop future generations from doing the same.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past: The Study of the History of historical Scholarship* (London: 1955) p.96.

The standards of human rights historiography serve to obscure our grasp of how previous societies viewed their world and the choices available to them. Under this moral scheme, the Aztecs are to be condemned for practicing human sacrifice to appease their gods, and the Anglo-Saxons are to be chastised for sanctioning trial by ordeal as a means of dispute resolution. It is neither fair nor realistic to assess the actions of our forebears according to standards they would not have understood let alone agreed with.

Rewriting historical events to accommodate the precepts of human rights grants the author a moral status he does not deserve. It allows him to pretend that were he faced with the same options as the people he assesses he would have behaved differently by acting in ways that safeguard the dignity of the individual.

This view is ahistorical and unrealistic because it presumes that were the author transposed into the era he writes about, he would not have been affected by its norms and values: *if you were an Aztec would you have opposed human sacrifice even though you believed it was the only way to assuage the gods and safeguard the community?* Probably not.

When observed without a human rights lens, 'backward' customs such as the Anglo-Saxon trial by ordeal suddenly become intelligible. This harrowing method of ascertaining innocence or guilt was used because it was believed that if an individual was innocent they would survive the ordeal because God had granted them favour.

If history is written with an appreciation of the norms of the past, humanity will get much closer to understanding the motivations of historical actors. This does not mean that flagrant acts of evil should be excused, for deeds have been committed which would have shocked the conscious even in their own day. The decisions which historical figures made should be assessed according to the choices available to them; those choices are informed by their own ethical milieu and their lived experience.

If we eschew human rights as an interpretive guide, history becomes less a study of 'rights' and 'wrongs' and more of a sober investigation into the motivations and consequences of people's actions. In doing so we come closer to finding the truth and learn a greater appreciation of the human condition.