


ROUNDTABLE

Confronting the Past: The Role of the European Historian Today

Emile Chabal  and Eirini Karamouzi

School of History, Classics and Archaeology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9AG, United Kingdom
emile.chabal@gmail.com

Department of History, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, United Kingdom and The American College of Greece, Aghia Paraskevi, Athens, Greece
e.karamouzi@sheffield.ac.uk

The pandemic may have consigned historians to their homes, but this did not stop history from taking centre-stage in public debate. From falling statues to culture wars, history in all its forms has continued to be deployed by states, activists, prestigious institutions and grassroots organisations. As has always been the case, those who study history for a living have rarely played a prominent role in these debates. At best, historians have tended to be confined to supporting roles as ‘advisers’, ‘consultants’ or ‘experts’. Still, even for those historians who eschew the rough-and-tumble of political and civic discussion, it is impossible to remain entirely neutral. Governments and politicians can overturn funding priorities; universities can suddenly find themselves targets of hostile political campaigning; and lecture halls can turn into sites of civic struggle. This constant historical instrumentalisation is a dramatic reminder of the power of narratives in constructing realities.

What should historians do in the face of this making and unmaking of history? Should they respond? If so, how? Quite apart from their intrinsic value, these questions reflect long-standing issues with which we, as journal editors, grapple every day. After all, *Contemporary European History* was created after the end of the Cold War, when a ‘new’ Europe was under construction – and, in a very modest form, it partook in this project. The journal and its editors have continuously moved back and forth between the scholarly world of peer-reviewed research and unfolding political crises. When this roundtable was first imagined in 2019, we thought it would serve a valuable function for contemporary European historians as a starting point for reflection about the profession and its priorities. We wanted to contribute to a rethinking of basic notions about modern European history, and we hoped to understand the impact of the different layers of experience of each generation on the telling of history. By the time we were able to organise the in-person event that preceded the publication of this roundtable in the journal, a major war had broken out in Europe for the first time since the 1990s. In Ukraine, the politics of history has taken on a terrifying dimension. Our discussion – which had once seemed merely important – had now become urgent.

It is inevitable, then, that the present political context intrudes in the following pages. Indeed, Sergey Radchenko directly addresses the use of history in the war in Ukraine in his essay, showing how easy it is for leaders to weaponise historical narratives for their own purposes. More generally, the spectre of populism looms over several other contributions. Pawel Machcewicz tells the disturbing story of how successive right-wing governments in Poland have destroyed the scholarly landscape by manipulating research institutes and museums. And Dominique Reill explores how the legacy of the Trump presidency has deformed perceptions of Europe in the American public sphere.

But the question of the political does not always relate to contemporary events. In many cases, the struggle over memory can be just as potent as the struggle over the present. Both Jelena Subotic and Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid’s essays deal with historical periods that are long gone, but whose legacy insistently penetrates the present. They put into perspective the culture of remembrance and examine

how history and memory can become prized tools for political manipulation. Subotic tackles the thorny issue of ‘looted’ artworks that now reside in European museums, while Nic Dháibhéid looks back over a decade of commemorations of the end of British rule in Ireland. In both cases, memories of past events become intertwined with current political battles. The result is a criss-crossing of approaches and perspectives that does not necessarily lead to clarity or (the much sought-after) ‘resolution’ of difference.

The in-person event that gave shape to this roundtable took place at the American College of Greece in Athens. Not surprisingly, then, we wanted to include essays specifically focused on the contemporary history of southern Europe. There are three such contributions, by Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, Giorgios Antoniou and Kostis Kornetis. All of them deal in one way or another with the legacy of military dictatorship, a common feature of the countries usually grouped under the label of southern Europe. The ruptures that preceded and followed periods of military rule intensified public disagreements and led to divided memories. These are captured in sites of memory like the oral history archive that is the subject of Antoniou’s essay or the TV and film series that are the subject of Kornetis’s essay. Of course, it was not only southern Europe that experienced political upheaval in the postwar period. Germany, too, was divided and part of the country was, from the late 1940s to the late 1980s, ruled by a very different form of government to the ‘liberal’ regimes of the democratic West. As Sandrine Kott and Thomas Wieder’s essay reminds us, the legacy of East German communism continues to trouble the consensual national memory of a reunified Germany.

Finally, this roundtable includes an essay by David Motadel that focuses on some of the more conceptual and methodological questions that arise from an engagement with the present. Alongside Reill’s plea for a new kind of European history that does not fall prey to the facile simplifications of the American left and right, Motadel offers us some challenging reflections on the benefits and perils of political engagement by historians. Ultimately, Motadel and Reill offer the same basic advice: historians should keep doing what they were trained to do and strive to bring historical sensibility to their audiences.

It goes without saying that none of these essays should be considered definitive statements on their subjects. They are time-bounded (and lightly referenced) responses to the political and scholarly universe of 2022. But this is what gives them their potency. The contributors to this forum have taken seriously the challenge of contemporary history, namely the need to balance past and future in the service of scholarly rigour. This does not mean silencing the present. Rather, the varied contributions to this roundtable serve as a vivid reminder that we – as European historians – operate in an environment that is governed by forces we cannot control. While this may compromise our scholarship at times, the realisation that we think and write in a specific political context can also allow us to put our expertise in the service of a richer public sphere.