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THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE HISTORIANS

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In my very concise remarks for this round table I will comment on the formulation of the topic, put some questions and suggest some answers. All this will be done in the long-term perspective of a professional historian who most of his time deals with the past of his own discipline in order to make history out of it.

My first comment is born out of a feeling of relief as the topic of responsibility, in the broadest meaning of the word, is explicitly put on the agenda. For a while, in the last few years, there dominated the feeling that in the humanities «anything goes», a persuasion owing more to David Lodge and his *Small World* than to Richard Rorty. Indeed, the world has become even smaller than David Lodge could have imagined, and maybe Morris Zapp would now surf on internet instead of moving to Europe. Nonetheless, not everybody has turned into a Morris Zapp and the discourse on the sense of responsibility is celebrating its comeback: but what sort of comeback? and under what sort of circumstances?

Second point: the title of the roundtable mentions the responsibility of an historian. An historian is the individual let on his own, loosely, sometimes very loosely connected with the ideal type of the historian as we all knew it: intellectually self-sustaining, absolutely self-confident, the nineteenth-century style historian was (and sometimes still makes believe he is) a minister of Clio, in constant touch with the *spiritus mundi* or the *Zeitgeist*. As a matter of fact he was the minister of the nation state whose legitimacy was based on its past - if correctly interpreted - and whose destiny was predicted by the historian. History was the past, from it the historian must select the tasks to be accomplished in the future. Most of us

call ourselves historians, but, at first glance at least, not much of a resemblance is left with our true ancestors, the «scientific» historians of the German Universities. If we admit that the variety of historians as a concept has substituted the historian, what is the common ground if any between 1996 practicing historians?

A third question. The role of historians has undergone radical changes in the twentieth century and the meaning and focus of their sense of responsibility with it. Historians have witnessed and in many cases have been instrumental in carrying out two world wars, systematic mass murders, the Holocaust, the use of nuclear weapons and something more too. No wonder, then, that however hesitatingly and belatedly (historians tend *par la nature des choses* to be rather conservative) they realized that things have changed and that they themselves are different from the individuals they were, say, before 1914, or before 1945, or before 1956, or before 1989. Are historians alone in coming to terms with this change? Or is it rather a change pertaining to most intellectual professionals in the last hundred years? Is this change more understandable if we compare historians with physicians, politicians, fiction writers?

A fourth point. Historians, since they have been aware of being historians, have reflected more or less explicitly on the implications of their work for state, society and religion, either their own or the neighbours' and enemies' state, society and religion: as Herodotus said, historians wrote «in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feud». If they did not themselves, somebody would have reminded them that they had responsibilities: Tacitus is the first name that comes to my mind: «In the year of the consulship of Cornelius Cossus and Asinius Agrippa, Cremutius Cordus was arraigned on a new charge, now for the first time heard. He had published a history in which he had praised Marcus Brutus and called Caius Cassius the last of the Romans. His accusers were Satrius Secundus and Pinarius Natta, creatures of Sejanus. This was enough to ruin him». In narrating historians' lives and reflecting on the implications of what they were doing, ancient historians articulated their conception of the historians' responsibility. Take Herodotus and Thucydides and you will find plenty of passages that express their idea of the historians task and its implications. Take the Christian historians of the Middle Ages or the humanist historians of fifteenth-century Florence and Milan: their sense of responsibility was clear and undisputed and can hardly be overlooked. But take Max Weber, Michael Foucault and Arnaldo

Momigliano and you will see that virtually all their historical writings are connected with the problem of coming to terms with the responsibility of an historian. Today's historiography is saturated with the awareness of the epistemological and linguistic premises and implications of the analysis of the past and the writing of historical works, while, to be extremely concise, the greatest concern of nineteenth century historians was, in theory at least, the congruity of the words they wrote and the reality of the past. The ethical responsibility has been mainly disjoined from the individual good will of the historian. Is this change of focus in the historians' self-awareness connected with the transformations in our approach to communication? A debate on linguistics and discourse is currently going on: is it bound with the problem of responsibility?

Raising questions is indeed easier than suggesting responses. But it is only fair to admit that all of us raise questions with a response in mind, and that answers are very often included in the questions. Surfing on questions without taking the chance to successfully land on the beach is a hollow illusion or blank self-deception.

It is clear that the responsibility of an historian in the next decades will look different from the sense of responsibility historians have shared in the last two hundred years. French, German and Italian historians in 1870 shared a common understanding of their position in society, addressed similar problems and had similar institutional partners: there was a historical profession with clear-cut insiders and outsiders. The Western world has gone through such institutional transformations that this social *ubiquitousness* of the historians has largely vanished. The state university system which celebrated its triumph in Europe after the World War II is collapsing under the weight of its success: as did the German *Urvolker* in Gibbon's declining Roman Empire, academic historians are now competing for declining resources and fading social status and have a very hard time to repel the assault of other sorts of historians, uncommitted to the state educational system. The possibility of disseminating forms of historical knowledge is already much greater than it used to be some twenty years ago and will increase dramatically in the next twenty years. There is a growing social demand for meaning in history and through history from more and more points of view. What has been misunderstood as the end of history or as post-histoire, is the need for reorientation in a global world. In this enlargement of the scope and audience of the historians I see a chance to enjoy more freedom in doing research and spread the results of original and innovative research. One of the historian's responsibilities is therefore to jump out of his or her shadow, as the baron of Munchhausen did, overcome

his or her traditional attitude and national or local narrow-mindedness and address as large an audience as possible. If historians really accept to be criticized and evaluated by a wide audience (and this is indeed an ethical decision), there is a possibility that historians stand again on a common ground. When one speaks of historical truth, such unpleasant concepts as essentialism and objectivism, maybe dogmatism, come to one's mind. Peter Novik has described in very compelling terms why this happened in America and Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* or history of the concepts makes the same point about scepticism in the historical truth. Nobody should be in mourning because a naive belief in the historical truth has been - finally - discredited; we all should welcome a careful, disingenuous and accurate language when writing about the past. It is both: merely a technical problem and an ethical responsibility. Both aspects of an historical description have to accept that something out there, sometime in the past, has happened: this is what we call the truth and we know it thanks to some sort of evidence. Being honest about the straightforward factual matters is an individual choice and, as everybody knows, it is hard enough. But this is the distinction between history and fiction and the similarity between history and medicine. There is nothing to do if a doctor wants to kill somebody he is supposed to take care of; there is nothing to do if an historian is a willful liar and has total control over the evidence to the point that he can destroy it completely. In both cases the doctor and the historian are violating one of the minimal requirements of human life: that language is fair communication and that what we say must be subject to criticism and can be verified.

As human beings historians have the same responsibility as everybody else who is engaged in public discourse. As professional historians have a responsibility towards the documentary evidence of the past: we have to explore it and think about it with as much energy and intelligence as we can muster, and possibly write interesting stories as contributions to collective self-understanding and self-interpretation.