
Reply to Vinen

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It is possible, as Richard Vinen claims, that I arrange historians into categories that are too neat and selective. But I am puzzled by the relationship of his examples to the particular point that I was making. My argument was that the two world wars were experienced as a crisis that placed in doubt the assumptions underlying the interpretation of the long-term progress of European civilisation. I limited my illustration of this to historians who – during these thirty years – wrote histories of Europe that seemed to me to exemplify their responses, either through their vindication of what Europe had offered to humanity until its self-destruction, or, in Toynbee's case, through a comparative study of the cycle of civilisations. Marc Bloch was not included because his *Strange Defeat* was specific to France; whereas Braudel (whom I should have included) seems to me to strengthen my case, as his *Mediterranean* certainly carries the message of European civilisation. The fact that Pirenne's great work was only published posthumously is interesting, but it is *when* he wrote it that matters. His age, like Fisher's, seems to me irrelevant, or possibly even confirms the importance for historians of an earlier liberal period of the identification of Europe's history with progress.

Vinen then challenges my worries about official influence on the writing of history. Maybe I have gone too native, while Vinen has certainly resisted French sirens. He is undoubtedly right to make the distinction between states where governments influenced (and, in the 'new' states of the 1990s, continue to influence) textbooks (did I say anything about academic appointments?). And I agree with him that history is far less important in elite education than in the nineteenth century. Nor would (or could) I dispute that official influence can be counterproductive. From a British academic perspective, my pessimism may seem misplaced. But Vinen's examples seem to me to miss my argument, which relates to the pervasive influence and limiting effects of an orthodoxy of what is regarded and accepted as mainstream research, applied not by administrative or official fiat but more subtly, for example through research funding or publishers' propositions. Thomas Kuhn's scientific paradigm about such 'environmental' conditioning of the direction of research, published decades ago, seems to me wholly applicable to the social and human sciences, especially in the contemporary academic world where research funding boards and quality assessments have become our lighthouses – in Britain as much as on the befogged Continent. Of course there are, and always will be, rogue elephants and outsiders to the academic pale (though, for social Darwinist reasons, most younger specimens remain unknown, as they fail to slip through the barricades of the productivist researches of academic preferment).

I agree that national histories are not necessarily celebratory. Defeat as well as triumph has always belonged to the national patriotic canon, from the Serbs'

exaltation of the epic defeat of Kosovo in 1389 to Churchill's transformation of the precipitous retreat from Dunkirk into a victory. Vinen correctly points to the importance of the anguished revelation of national shame (the Nazi and Vichy regimes) in recent teaching and discussion of the past. I believe that postwar West Germans have been unique in the centrality they have long attributed to guilt as a defining feature of their national identity. I would add that, apart from the French and (most impressively) the Swiss, recognition of the implications of atrocities or collaboration with the Nazis for a reading of the national past remains exceptional; in Italy it has come too late to stem the rising tide of equating fascism and democracy, and silence continues to prevail in Croatia, Slovakia or Austria, not to speak of Russia or Japan. In any case, my point was that precisely because 'Europe-building' is less able than were the earlier experiences of nation-building to identify elements that can function emotively as collective memories, the Enlightenment-liberal formulation of cultural continuity and progress and economic entrepreneurship takes pride of place as defining evidence of Europe's superiority to other areas of the world.

Of course Dickens, Dumas or Hugo were more influential than historians; as was E. M. Forster yesterday, or Abraham Yehoshua and the marvellous generation of novelists of the decline of colonialism are today. And if the phenomenon of *Ego-Histoires* is more apparent today, I would attribute this to the prolongation of our lifespan and the conviction of the aged – including historians – and of their publishers that readers are interested in course of their lives and their acquaintances. Again I have the impression that Vinen and I have different bugbears. The fact that professional historians are now consulted in historical films (Natalie Zemon Davies can be added, with *The Return of Martin Guerre*) does not remove my concern that television in particular, on the basis of newsreels, propaganda films and similar, has led to an evocation of the past – from political 'great men' to 'what life was like during the war' – that can be deeply misleading by placing everything and everybody (bar the exceptional scapegoat, such as Hitler) on the same plane, without the critical analysis of historical contextualisation: why wars were fought, or miners went on strike, or there was a Bolshevik revolution, is ignored or manipulated, since the prime purpose is entertainment or political fodder.

I am relieved that the grass is greener in Britain than on the Continent. But Vinen's response, while clarifying unclear shortcuts and weaknesses in my argument, confirms my long-held disquiet about how 'nationally' subjective we are in our approaches to history.