THE ABUSE OF HISTORY

DEMARCATIONS, DEFINITIONS AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abuses of history are frequently dangerous. They are common under dictatorships and in periods of gross human rights violations. They played a major role during the genocide in Rwanda (1994) and the wars in the former Yugoslavia (1991−1995). Although the natural habitat of the abuse of history is a nondemocratic environment, its persistent traces are also present in many democracies. Recently, communal tensions in India (1998−2004), for example, were partly incited by divergent and often distorted views of the past. How can we delineate, with some certainty, the boundaries of such abuses? This is only possible if we have a theory that provides an insight into what exactly happens when history is abused, and why and how such conduct should be judged.

Strangely enough, such an encompassing theory does not exist. This is because many historians who are informed about cases of abuse do not want to write about them for fear of a backlash. Even if they find the courage, they often lack time, while those who do find time to become whistleblowers are frequently more fascinated by the often unpleasant details of the individual case they are describing and defending rather than by similarities to other cases. If they do seek patterns, they rarely have more than a few cases at their disposal or only use cases that represent one dimension or type of abuse, thereby hindering broad generalizations and a global view. That is why the numerous essays about the abuse of history usually describe the political context of historical writing in certain, often dictatorial, countries. This is useful but purely practical. Even theoretical works broaching the subject are captivated by an inductive approach. They usually describe history as an instrument legitimizing ideology and power (which it often is), but do not systematically test a theory against the abuses they analyse.[1]

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[1] For example, Ferro, *Use and Abuse*; Finley, *Use and Abuse*; Geyl, *Use and Abuse*; Lewis, *History Remembered*; Todorov, 'Abuses of Memory'. My own analysis of the censorship of history was also centred on the basic notion of legitimation. See De Baets, *Censorship*, pp. 1−36. Essays by F.W. Nietzsche and W. B. Gallie carrying the phrase 'the use and abuse of history' in their titles do not deal with abuses. Throughout this essay, I have deliberately abstained from giving concrete examples of abuses. For many examples, see De Baets, *Censorship*.

Only the classic works on the methodology of history and their successors pay some theoretical attention to the question of abuse, specifically in the discussion of the so-called 'internal criticism of the lie and the error' (by which the lies and errors of source producers, not of professional historians, are meant), or in the mention of different series of motives for the writing of history. Such considerations, however, are seldom supplemented with theoretical reflections on conduct and intention or with notions of harm and wrongdoing.

I cannot expound my complete theory in the following paper. Here, I will only offer some notes on its character and basic concepts, and describe it from a historical perspective. The complete theory will be presented in my forthcoming book *Responsible History*, where I explore in depth the aspects of the theory not treated here.[2]

1.   *Demarcations*

Abusive history is continuously misinterpreted and confused with other types of history. The table presented below attempts to clarify some basic distinctions drawn by peers and others (to the very imperfect extent that these distinctions are amenable to visualization). The demarcation between scientific and nonscientific history concerns, first of all, questions of truth. I profoundly share the views of the sociologist Edward Shils (1910–95) on truth. A professor at the University of Chicago and founder of *Minerva: A Review of Science, Learning and Policy* in 1962, he was one of the world's leading experts on higher education and the nature of scholarship. His major defence of the academic ethic begins as follows:

> Universities have a distinctive task. It is the methodical discovery and the teaching of truths about serious and important things … That truth has a value in itself, apart from any use to which it is put, is a postulate of the activities of the university. It begins with the assumption that truth is better than error …[3]

In the philosophy of science many theories distinguishing truth from error have been defended. Insights into the epistemological demarcation problem

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[2] The missing parts deal with (1) the abuse of history as a wrong, and the importance of a theory on this; (2) evidence of abuse and irresponsible use: material elements; (3) evidence of abuse and irresponsible use: mental elements; (4) explanation of abuse and irresponsible use; (5) intrinsic importance and importance relative to textual context and frequency; (6) justifications and wrongdoing; (7) excuses and pseudo-excuses; (8) mitigating and aggravating factors; (9) sanctions; and (10) prevention.

[3] Shils, *Calling of Education*, p. 3.

have changed over time and none of the theories have ever gained universal acceptance. I will use one of the theories best suited to the needs of history, that expounded by Karl Popper. According to Popper, the central question is whether a given theory – here, a theory about past events – is falsifiable or not, in other words whether a test can be developed to reject that theory. Such a test investigates the relationship between the theory, the available sources, the strength of the method applied and the logic of the argument. The test result decides the status of the theory. If the theory passes the test, it is provisionally accepted as scientific. If it is rejected (that is, it does not pass the test), it acquires the status of nonscientific history. When a theory which has been provisionally accepted is tested again with new data, new methods, or from a different perspective, and rejected after this new test, it receives the status of exscientific history.[4] History that turns out to be of the non- or exscientific kind is not meaningless. Indeed, as part of ideologies, myths, legends or other beliefs about the world, it may provide meaning for those who hold such beliefs.[5] As conjecture, it may anticipate or inspire future scientific theories. However, as long as it does not pass the test, this 'history' is not scientific.

Other demarcations are drawn almost simultaneously. Their main features are ethical, professional and, to a lesser degree, legal rather than epistemological: when combined, they mark the boundary between the responsible use, the irresponsible use and the abuse of history. Although these ethico-legal demarcations often lead to an epistemological distinction between false and provisionally true knowledge, they are partly different and broader. They are concerned less with the theories of historians than with historians themselves, less with truth than with truthfulness.

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[4] Popper, *Logic*, pp. 34–42, 278–282, and Popper, *Conjectures*, pp. 33–41, 253–258. For good overviews of demarcation theories, see Truzzi, 'Pseudoscience', *passim*; and Dolby, *Uncertain Knowledge*, pp. 159–165, 184–225. See also Stump, 'Pseudoscience', *passim*. Dolby enumerated the following demarcation principles: authoritative classification (August Comte), induction (John Stuart Mill), convention (Henri Poincaré), operationism (P.W. Bridgman), true protocol statements (logical positivists), falsifiable hypotheses (Karl Popper), progressive research programmes (Imre Lakatos), no demarcation (Paul Feyerabend), heuristic value (pragmatists), and correct ideology (Marxism). See Dolby, *Uncertain Knowledge*, pp. 163–164.

[5] This view of the importance of myths has many antecedents, for example in the work of Giambattista Vico. See also Lowenthal, 'Fabricating Heritage'. For reflections on myths, see McNeill, 'Mythistory', pp. 6–9. For a reflection on the coexistence of contradictory beliefs in the human mind, see Veyne, *Les Grecs*.

DEMARCATIONS IN HISTORICAL WRITING			
prescientific history			
↓ *demarcations of epistemology* (= test of truth) and *ethics* (= test of truthfulness)			
↓ **irresponsible history**		↓ **responsible, provisionally scientific history**	↓ **nonscientific history**
↓ **abusive history (pseudohistory)**	↓ **negligent and reckless history**	↓ (when failing new tests →)	**(exscientific history)**
↓ *demarcation of competence* (= test of quality and expertise)			
works somewhere on a continuum from incompetent ('bad') to competent ('good') history			
↓ *demarcation of meaning*			
works meaningful not as history but as sources illustrating irresponsible history		works somewhere on a continuum from meaningful to meaningless history	
↓ *judgment of morality, professionalism and legality*			
always morally wrong	often morally wrong	morally, professionally and legally right	right or wrong (depending on use)
always professionally wrong; sometimes legally wrong			
↓ *calculus of harm*			
always harmful	sometimes harmful		
↓ *calculus of risk*			
frequently dangerous	sometimes dangerous		

Table 1.

The table also draws a distinction between professionalism and competence: abusive history can be extremely refined and skilful, but it is never professional. All types of history lie on a continuum ranging from competent to incompetent history. Incompetent (or 'bad') history – the product of error, imperfect insight and lack of training – can be heavily distorting and prejudiced, but it is not irresponsible or abusive as long as it does not transgress the moral boundary of dishonesty or gross negligence. Furthermore, the table distinguishes harm from risk. I maintain that the abuse of history is always harmful (a point elaborated below) and frequently dangerous (as illustrated above). Responsible scientific history and nonscientific history can also be harmful and dangerous, but for other, mutually exclusive, reasons: nonscientific history for creating myths that incite hatred and violence; scientific history for destroying cherished myths and exploding taboos at the risk of unleashing retaliatory violence in the process. If the latter is the case, responsible historians risk being treated as the destroyers of reputations or as traitors and being threatened with judicial or physical reprisal by governments, individuals or groups. Here, the historical perception of the public is crucial: frequently, audiences are not able to distinguish scientific from nonscientific history and are not willing to accept harsh truths over comfortable errors and lies.

2. *Definitions*

The irresponsible use of history and the abuse of history are not identical. While the latter is characterized by lack of integrity, the former is broader and characterized either by lack of integrity or lack of care. I propose the following definitions:

> The abuse of history is its use with the intent to deceive.
> The irresponsible use of history is either its use with the intent to deceive or its negligent use.

And if we define the latter in terms of the former:

> The irresponsible use of history is either its abusive or its negligent use.

All abuse of history is irresponsible history, but not all irresponsible history is an abuse of history. 'Abuse of history' is an expression reserved for the stronger forms of irresponsible history, as is its synonym 'misuse of history'. The essential distinction between the abuse and the irresponsible use of history is located at the level of intention. I will leave this distinction

aside here and instead will concentrate solely on the stronger and potentially more problematic definition, that concerning the abuse of history.

Critics could reject my definition of the abuse of history because it harbours no reference to the negative consequences that the abuse entails for other persons. After all, abuse without harm is not very interesting. If this is indeed the case, why not reword the definition as *the abuse of history is its use with the intent to deceive and resulting in harm to others?* With the term 'others', this alternative definition introduces the victims of the abuser. Usually, two classes of victims are distinguished. Victims with an immediate interest are those who have their health, reputation, income or opportunities damaged. One may think of the people studied, those alive and (insofar as privacy and reputation is concerned) those deceased, and their relatives; authors whose work is plagiarized or falsified and their publishers; those providing data, assignments, contracts and funding to the abuser; and all those buying the deceptive product. A second class of victims encompasses those with no immediate interest: the community in which the subjects studied live, and all those misled by the deception, including scholars and experts. Although this alternative definition looks plausible, I reject it because there are too many objections to it.

Firstly, the alternative definition would diminish the morally and professionally condemnable nature of malicious conduct as such. Secondly, the definition would exclude attempted abuse: abuse that was not only prepared but also substantially close to completion but stopped or disclosed before being entirely executed. Some abuses of history can be committed 'on the spot', whereas others require substantial preparation. While these first two objections concern conduct, the following focus on the concept of harm itself.

In the first place, the alternative does not take into account abusive conduct which could have resulted in harm but did not – the existence of a *risk* of harm (inferred from its magnitude and probability) is itself harmful.[6] Secondly, the actual harm done to other persons is often not immediately and fully known at the time the abuse is committed (and if it is, it is not always accurately assessable). Thirdly, the alternative definition risks overlooking abuse that profits the abuser but does not ostensibly harm others. However, if somebody gains an unfair advantage, all those abiding by legal, professional and moral rules are proportionally harmed. This objection assumes that abuse *always* produces harm to other persons. The final and perhaps most important objection is a further elaboration of this thought. The alternative definition would deny the argument – weak in legal but strong in professional and ethical terms – that the intent to deceive *always* harms

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[6] Feinberg, *Harm to Others*, pp. 187–191.

even when it does not result in harm to other persons. This is so because the concept of victim may be said to encompass a hitherto unmentioned third class: historical writing itself.[7] Arguably, abuses by historians always damage historiography because historiography is a collective enterprise in which society has an interest. This is all the more so when dealing with professional historians because society places confidence in their academic and professional qualifications. Abuses threaten that confidence and, therefore, the authority and efficiency of professional historical writing. They stimulate beliefs in historical myths and propaganda or induce amnesia concerning a previously known history, and, therefore, the harm done to historical writing is also a social harm. In postdictatorial transitions to democracy, the harm suffered by historical writing after decades of abuse may come to full light: often, as was the case in postcommunist societies after 1989, history had gained the sad reputation of a discipline that condoned abuses. The overall public respect for, and trust in, the profession and its scientific search for historical truth was almost fatally undermined.[8] The last two objections support the view that harm consists of both the negative results of an abuse and that abuse itself. For all these reasons, my definition stands.

3.   *History of the abuse of history*

The study of the history of the abuse of history is an attempt to compare abuses in different historical settings. Confronted with such large-scale comparisons, the first impression is discouraging. The field is so wide and the literature so vast that it seems impossible to identify any clear lessons. Indeed, much of the general literature on forgery, plagiarism, fraud and other abuses, studied from a historical perspective, is also relevant to the special field of abuses of history. Three preliminary caveats are therefore in order. Most, though not all,[9] of the general literature about abuses concerns Western history − only insofar as non-Western history operates in ways similar to Western history are lessons from the latter applicable to the former. In addition, the further one moves away from the present and from countries with firm historiographical traditions, the less obvious is the classic definition of the historian as the professional who methodically studies the past. *Griots* and scribes fulfilled many of the functions of historians in

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[7] Applying Kant's argument in 'On a Supposed Right', p. 281: 'For a lie always harms another; if not some other particular man, still it harms mankind generally, for it vitiates the source of law itself'.

[8] De Baets, *Censorship*, p. 22.

[9] Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, pp. 54−56, 129−130; Fernández-Armesto, *Truth*; Smith, 'Human View', *passim.*

the past. Therefore, my analysis obligatorily applies to any practitioner of history, with only a few concluding thoughts being devoted to professional historians. Lastly, I will not say anything about the manifold forms of irresponsible history. Much that can be ascertained for the stronger version of the theory (abuse) applies to the weaker (irresponsible use) also, but weighing integrity and care over time are two different things.

Constants

When comparing abuses of history over centuries and placing them in their particular historical contexts, the central problem is whether the demarcation between the use and abuse of history is a modern one. A double strategy is necessary to solve that problem: we should firstly identify constants and variables in the history of the abuse of history and then weigh them against our theory.

The constants, presented here without any exhaustive pretence, ostensibly meet with near consensus. I will summarize them in staccato. Although no single abuser profile exists, the subtler abusers display great skills and sharp historical awareness, and usually considerable knowledge of history is required to successfully abuse it.[10] Furthermore, the works of abusers, however corrupt, can be considered as historical sources in their own right and merit preservation in an archive. They do not inform us about the period they pretend to treat, but about the period in which they were created and the decades and centuries in which they were accepted as true and received as authentic − such documents are sources for the history of the psychology of abusers and myth makers, and their audiences.[11] To the extent that deceptive theories emanating from abuses were believed by many, they often had important consequences as people could and did act upon them. In general, these consequences were negative, although that was by no means always the rule.[12] To the extent that deceptive theories were *not* believed, they elicited sceptical responses. One such major positive, but of course unintended, response was that the passion for unmasking suspected abuse and false testimony stimulated the development of the historical-critical method of separating truth from lie.[13] At the level of motivation, the reasons for unmasking

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[10] See LaFollette, *Stealing*, p. 43; Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, pp. 61−62; De Baets, *Censorship*, p. 17.

[11] Bloch, *Apologie*, p. 43; Constable, 'Forgery and Plagiarism', pp. 1−2; Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire*, p. 303; Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, pp. 67, 125.

[12] See many examples in Eco, 'Force of Falsity', *passim.*

[13] Bloch, *Apologie*, p. 41; Schauer, *Free Speech*, pp. 74−75; Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire*, p. 22; Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, pp. 5−6, 28, 123−127.

abuse were and are as mixed as those behind abuse itself. The role played by personal rivalry and bias in the exposure of abuse is often considerable.[14]

Perhaps the most fundamental insight – obvious but worth repeating – is that truth is a basic value for persons and societies. Naturally, truth has a provisional, plural and perspectival character. However, this tentative truth – the only one to which we can ever aspire – is intrinsically better than error and falsity. The search for it lies at the core of any academic ethic, while, perceived instrumentally, truth is one of the chief conditions of human dignity, communication, science, democracy and personal and social survival. 'There is no social order without trust and no trust without truth … [I]t is … impossible to be human without having a concept of truth'.[15] The alternative is social disorder, misery, war and death. Those disagreeing with the thesis of the superiority of truth over falsity defend a self-defeating view: they want their claim that truth is *not* superior to acquire the status of a truth.[16]

Wherever there are traditions of textual criticism and criteria for science, discussion about the epistemological and ethical demarcations of knowledge emerges. This means that in areas and countries with old and strong historiographical traditions (such as China or the West) this discussion is very old. The abuse of history has been recognized, condemned, prohibited and punished from early times, although also sometimes ordered and condoned.[17] In *La divina commedia*, Dante put all the fraudulent in the eighth circle of Hell, *malebolge*. Within this last but one circle, falsifiers and liars were to be found in the tenth and deepest ditch or *bolgia*. Those fraudulent types who were driven by motives and convictions that they considered noble and just sometimes entertained the illusion that they were not abusing history. Most abusers, however, knew very well what they were doing, and they often belonged to the cultural elite.[18] In sum, tampering with archival sources (heuristic abuse), statements of fact and theories (epistemological abuse), and entire works (pragmatic abuse) is a macrohistorical phenomenon.

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[14] Butterfield, 'Delays and Paradoxes', pp. 6–8; Butterfield, 'Historiography', pp. 484, 485, 487; Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, pp. 83–85, 92–93, 95–98, 117, 126.

[15] Fernández-Armesto, *Truth*, pp. 3–4. See also Danto, 'Prudence', pp. 80–81; Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 457–461.

[16] Finnis, 'Scepticism, Self-Refutation', *passim*; Blackburn, *Truth*, pp. 23–44.

[17] Ouy, 'Les Faux', pp. 1371, 1373; Constable, 'Forgery and Plagiarism', p. 16; Clanchy, *From Memory*, pp. 321, 325; Brown, 'Falsitas', pp. 101, 106, 118; Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, pp. 36–37.

[18] Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, pp. 45, 48–49; Clanchy, *From Memory*, p. 319; Goetz, 'Historical Consciousness', pp. 351, 358.

Variables

Time-dependent variables qualify this picture of the long-term occurrence of abuse. Even though the demarcation between the use and abuse of history has long been known to be a common occurrence, it became sharper as science was transformed into an institutionalized practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Variables related to truth conceptions, method and evidence, motives and authorial individuality, were markedly different before and after 1700.

Firstly, oral societies and societies in transition to a written and printed culture entertained several coexisting notions of truth. *Factual truth* means that a true statement about the past corresponds to past reality. In its most primitive form, this old realist theory − incessantly attacked and always in retreat but never entirely defeated − was known as the correspondence theory. Simultaneously, along with this scientific notion, two other powerful conceptions linked historical truth not to past reality but to its observer. *Moral or personal truth* made truth dependent on the observer's intention: a true statement about the past was a statement made by honest, trustworthy persons. Truth was not what had happened but what these honest persons thought should have happened – according to their own insights or those of God.[19] *Orthodox truth* made truth dependent on status and, insofar as higher status survived better than lower status, on time. It was associated with divine or human authority and therefore with ancestry and tradition: a true statement about the past was an old and authoritative statement. The example rather than the original set the tone.[20]

Whenever personal and orthodox truth prevailed, imitation and quotation of past masters, acknowledged or not, were inevitable and desirable. These were signs of respect instead of disrespect, and evidence of the technical mastery of a genre.[21] Both truth conceptions often encouraged practices such as the use of anonymity and pseudonymity by authors. In this context of a highly valued tradition, the wisdom of old masters was conveniently adapted (and sometimes the old masters themselves were invented) to satisfy presentist needs and interests.[22] Although the blend of these conceptions of truth (scientific, personal, orthodox) fluctuated greatly over centu-

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[19] Clanchy, *From Memory*, pp. 148−149; Smith, 'Human View', *passim;* Constable, 'Forgery and Plagiarism', pp. 13, 16, 23−26, 30, 33, 36, 38. See, however, Brown, 'Falsitas', pp. 105−106.
[20] Constable, 'Forgery and Plagiarism', p. 27; Eco, *Limits*, p. 187; Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, pp. 129−130; Fernández-Armesto, *Truth*, pp. 46−81; Mallon, *Stolen Words*, p. 3.
[21] Constable, 'Forgery and Plagiarism', p. 30.
[22] Bloch, *Apologie*, pp. 43−44.

ries and cultures (and still does), the relative strength of nonscientific truth conceptions was greater then than now.

The second aspect, the slow and highly uneven development of the historical-critical method necessary for unmasking and proving abuse, has been studied by Herbert Butterfield. Historians, he maintains, have always been acutely aware of the fact that people make mistakes or are capable of being dishonest, but this did not prevent historical criticism from evolving unusually slowly and with great fragility into the sophisticated method we know today. For centuries, human beings did not see clearly how they might correct untrustworthy history or reconstruct forgotten history. The analytic achievements of the seventeenth century or the hesitant transition of history into a recognized form of scholarship in the nineteenth century were the combined culmination of training, technical insight and consciousness of one's own bias.[23]

Thirdly, nonscientific or instrumental motives for writing history were welcomed with less reservation than today. For example, tolerance towards aesthetic motives such as embellishing historical narrative with semi-fictitious speeches was generally high.[24] In particular, the view that history was philosophy by example and constituted a large storehouse of moral lessons had a universal appeal and received an unreserved welcome unthinkable today. Fourthly, the individual, authentic and original character of authorship received very uneven appreciation over time. Such appreciation was, for example, greater during the Hellenistic period than in the Western Middle Ages, especially during the so-called golden era of forgery, the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[25] Indeed, during these two centuries, the shift from oral to written testimony brought about a nagging uncertainty about entitlements formerly based on oral testimony, and often provoked a need to commit forgery.[26] In contrast to oral misrepresentation, however, abuses that were written down and printed tended to become permanent.[27] Therefore, the staggering increase in written documentation and the advent of printing with its unprecedented circulation that ranged across borders gradually changed the perception of the individuality of authors and sharpened criteria for determining their authenticity and originality.

What, then, changed around 1700? Several converging developments in the wake of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the

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[23] Butterfield, 'Historiography', pp. 464, 475–477, 484–485, 487.

[24] Haywood, *Faking It*, p. 10.

[25] Clanchy, *From Memory*, pp. 318–319; Constable, 'Forgery and Plagiarism', pp. 11–13; Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, pp. 24, 36–37.

[26] Clanchy, *From Memory*, pp. 322–323.

[27] Ibid., pp. 193, 298; Mallon, *Stolen Words*, p. 4.

Enlightenment made the scholarly aspect of these four variables decisively more visible and important. The modern footnote, perceived as an acknowledgment of intellectual debt, was invented around 1700.[28] Around the same time, the terms fabrication (in the sense of falsification) and plagiarism made their first appearance and the first copyright law took effect.[29] In the early eighteenth century, the *systematic* use of evidence, especially nonliterary evidence – formerly mainly an activity of antiquarians and erudites – became accepted practice among historians.[30] Concomitantly, the standards of historical criticism reached a more refined and rigorous level. The nineteenth century brought the emergence of modern scientific history with its emphasis on authentic sources. The process of professionalization of the craft compelled historians to think more deeply about good and bad history – and about practitioners inside and outside that profession. Paradoxically, that process also made historians more dependent on governments and often transformed them into purveyors of historical myths that were needed for nation-building but presented under the cloak of objectivity.[31] The *Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works*, drafted in 1886, carried clauses about the moral right and copyright of authors. Its last revision (1979) states:

> Independently of the author's economic rights, and even after the transfer of the said rights, the author shall have the right to claim authorship of the work and to object to any distortion, mutilation or other modification of, or other derogatory action in relation to, the said work, which would be prejudicial to his honour or reputation.[32]

Today, copyright protection is seen as an incentive for intellectual creation. Much attention is given to the balance between authorial rights and the public interest in education, research and access to information.[33]

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[28] Grafton, *Footnote*, p. 191. See also Constable, 'Forgery and Plagiarism', pp. 29, 39.

[29] Mallon, *Stolen Words*, pp. xii, 2, 24, 39. Forgery became a statutory offence in England in 1562.

[30] Momigliano, 'Ancient History', pp. 2, 6–7, 9–10, 24–25, 27. See also Ginzburg, 'Checking the Evidence', pp. 80, 91.

[31] See Iggers, 'Uses and Misuses', pp. 314–316. Many others have emphasized this point.

[32] *Berne Convention*, Article 6*bis* (1).

[33] *WIPO Copyright Treaty*, Preamble.

The thesis of the use and abuse of history as a modern demarcation

From this overview of constants and variables, it can be inferred that the distinction between the use and abuse of history is not a modern one and, at the same time, that it has changed radically over time. This conclusion is marred with ambiguity and therefore I need to explain it further. The *awareness* of abuses and the will to identify them as wrongs (the level of *definition*) were present of old, but the concept of deceptive intention crucial in our definition, and, perhaps, the distinction between fact and fiction, were interpreted less strictly by many in various epochs than they are today. The eagerness to prove truth and expose abuse (the level of *evidence*), also an age-old mark, was hampered by the fact that the *critical tools* to carry out this operation were weaker in earlier times – and became more rigorous only very gradually.

At the level of *motivation*, the role of nonscientific motives was far greater and less contested in earlier centuries, and served as a basis for condoning, justifying, excusing and mitigating the perpetration of abuses to a degree unacceptable today. Situations in which scientific motives are less central enhance the risk of abuse. Finally, the *evaluation* of the abuse was markedly different. In the past, not only did a generally less strict application of the concept of deception exclude much conduct from the definition of abuse, but the evaluation of the remaining wrongs which effectively fell under the definition of abuse, as well as the harm they inflicted, also deviated significantly from the norm of today.

At all levels, truth standards, scholarly practice, the appreciation of nonscientific motives and insight into the role of integrity as the moral basis of science, things were done differently in the premodern and early modern past. However, because the presence of evidential tools functions as a threshold under which abuses cannot be detected efficiently, and because the presence of nonscientific motives is always a matter of degree of compatibility with the search for truth, the differences appear widest at the levels of definition and evaluation. Therefore, the abuse of history as defined here is a concept that can be applied appropriately to premodern times *if and only if* considerable care is taken, above all, in weighing the different modes of definition and evaluation. Three successive major shifts in history – the transition from memory to written and printed record; changing perceptions of science, evidence and authorship; and, above all, the professionalization of history – marked a watershed in evaluating abuses before and after 1800. However, as is obvious from my hesitant chronology, it remains notoriously difficult to indicate any single key moment between 1500 and 1900.

The thesis of an increase in abuses

It is also open to debate whether the abuse of history is on the rise at the
dawn of the twenty-first century. Discussion of this thesis is complicated by
a factor just revealed. Some practices identified as abuses today were per-
ceived as wrongs but not defined or evaluated as abuses in the past. What
looks like an increase in abuses of history, therefore, could well be nothing
more than the *trompe l'oeil* effect of stricter contemporary criteria. Even so,
the thesis of an increase is buttressed by two arguments, concerning demog-
raphy and technology. As the world population increases, more groups and
peoples than ever claim that they have a separate identity and incorporate
history to support their claims, tailoring it to their needs in the process. The
result is an explosive increase of mutually incompatible, and often falsified,
histories. In addition, the omnipresent mass media and the Internet endow
historical discussions with immediate and potentially large-scale public
resonance. Furthermore, current digital technology allows abusers to remain
quasi-anonymous and their abuse to be executed easily, leaving few, if any,
traces.

There are, however, two arguments that counterbalance the thesis of an
increase. Due to a shortage of historical sources, we may be less well in-
formed about practices in the past that were recognized and judged as
abuses even then. In addition, discussion about the modernity of abuse has
revealed that scientific motives were less central in the past and that this en-
hanced the risk of abuse.

A final factor, the impact of democracy, is somewhat ambiguous and
may serve to buttress either position. The twentieth-century downfall of
many dictatorships notorious for their rewriting of history resulted in the
spread of democracy and with it better conditions for writing and teaching
history truthfully. In 2005, the United Nations asserted that at the closure of
the twentieth century, and for the first time in world history, the majority of
countries were democratic.[34] As democracies favour free expression, unfet-
tered debate, peer review and ethical awareness by definition, the chances
that abuse is detected and disclosed early increase. Democratic structures
cannot ban abuse, and in a paradoxical sense may even be said to enhance
the likelihood of its occurrence, if not on the scale of states, then on smaller,

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[34] The United Nations Development Programme asserted that the share of the
world's countries with multiparty electoral systems that met the wider criteria for
democracy rose from 39% in 1990 to 55% in 2003. See its *Human Development Re-
port 2005*, p. 20 (adapting earlier estimates in its *Human Development Report 2002*,
pp. 14–15).

less widespread and less systematic levels. Simon Blackburn formulated the problem as follows:

> [T]here is no reason whatever to believe that by itself freedom makes for truth … Freedom includes the freedom to blur history and fiction, or the freedom to spiral into a climate of myth, carelessness, incompetence or active corruption. It includes the freedom to sentimentalize the past, or to demonize the others, or to bury the bodies and manipulate the record.[35]

At the same time, the democratic effect tends to encourage the early exposure of abuse.

After weighing the arguments on both sides, the thesis of an overall increase of abuses is defensible in absolute terms and undecided in relative terms. The growing numbers of producers of nonscholarly versions of history obviously enhance the risk of abuse in absolute terms, but do not necessarily imply that in the past there were fewer abuses in proportion to the versions of history and the criteria of definition then available. A probable absolute increase of abuses, then, does not imply that humanity is more inclined to lie about its past and its identity than earlier, or the opposite. When the thesis is tested with respect to professional historians alone, similar arguments come into play. There are more professional historians than ever before and they possess increasingly powerful research tools. Therefore, the *risk* of abuse is enhanced in absolute terms. At the same time, the ever-present concern of the trade to adopt a common ethic has become more visible and acute since the 1990s. The historian who formulates that ethic when trying to sum up what is really at stake in cases of grave abuse of history should remember the words of Voltaire:

> Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.

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[35] Blackburn, *Truth*, p. 167.