REVIEW ESSAY

Berger, S. (Ed.). (2019). *The Engaged Historian: Perspectives on the Intersections of Politics, Activism and the Historical Profession*, New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Reviewed by Emmy Côté, PhD student, McGill University

The Engaged Historian, an ambitious collective work gathering 15 chapters for as many authors, explores the complex relationship between history and political engagement. As asserted by Stefan Berger, historical scholarship since the Enlightenment has intended to pursue standards of objectivity and truth, committed to capture “how it really was” (p. 33) to use Leopold von Ranke’s memorable phrase. Political engagement, guided by decision and action, was seen as a threat defying impartiality. Thus, conventionally, professional historians have endeavored to distance themselves from the ‘political’. However, as evidenced by this book, this sought-after dissociation does not resist the careful examination of the various aspects of their relationship: History and political engagement have been deeply intertwined in practice.

In his extensive introduction grounded in a typically historical approach, Berger retraces the evolution of the interconnections between the historian's practice of history and its commitment to politics. It appears that historians, consciously and willingly leaving their ivory tower (academia) behind, often shelved their historical scholarship aspirations for a while, to participate in public debates, social movements and the like. As the reader progresses in this entry to the topic, compelling questions are surfacing and disrupting the traditional pretensions: Can history and historians actually avoid political engagement? If not, why? What are plausible justifications for historians to be politically engaged in a way that is positively contributing to historical knowledge?

The first part of this book, rather succinct but composed of four indispensable chapters, attempts to respond to those interrogations in theoretical and philosophical terms. Jörn Rüsen’s first chapter on historical thinking, and Kalle Pihlainen’s third chapter on historical

writing, while focusing on two different dimensions of historical work, emphasize that it is impossible for even the most accomplished historical research to be entirely detached from the researcher and, by extension, the *ethicopolitical*. First, the past that historians seek to encapsulate is always understood through the prism of their own historical, social and cultural context. The researcher's struggle for rationality cannot exist apart from the writer's quest for identity. Second, the meaning of historians' interpretations is imprisoned in the language they use to write their narratives, which offer a "closure on the subjects of representations", a series of sentences with a "moralizing ending" (p. 65). Pihlainen argues, then, that historians cannot simply shy away behind method and evidence; detailed microhistories do not escape from political meaning.

Rüsen prefers to contrast engaged historiography to non-engaged historiography instead of history to political engagement. Engaged historiography is related to the imbalance of one of the five historical dimensions (cognitive, aesthetic, political, religious and ethical). Historical engagement only becomes problematic if one "dimension limits, hinders or even contradicts the deployment of sense and meaning in the others" (p. 39). Pihlainen argues in favour of poststructuralist history coupled with ethical accountability to overcome "history in the extreme" (p. 72). He claims, too, that the historical account should be conceived as a space of communication that clarifies, to the reader, the historian's "intentions and specifics of the genre" (p. 76). This echoes Rüsen's concept of "intersubjectivity" (p. 36). Pihlainen suggests, in fact, that the fundamental question is not whether history is telling the truth or not, but if history's good intentions toward truth are enough to be called "historical". Finally, the well-tied arguments presented in these chapters offer the necessary tools to justify the historians' political engagement and to dismiss their denial of responsibility in the face of societal issues.

The most significant contribution on how to weigh history and activism comes from Martin Wiklund's second chapter. The author writes that historical interpretations and judgement making should be modeled on the analogy of a court of justice, whereby the prosecutor's role is attributed to the historian. To him, the historian's function is to call out and develop a strong argument against injustices. However, Wiklund warns historians who would be tempted to act as both prosecutor and judge: "When the prosecutor has made his or her case, we do not think of the case as in any way settled yet but expect other voices to be uttered still and taken into consideration" (p. 49). Additionally, Wiklund insists on the danger for historians to adhere to a political cause; in the court of justice, the prosecutor is expected to avoid predetermined allegiance. Anticipating future criticisms, the author emphasizes that being in favour of "justice" to fight oppression is not the same partiality as siding with a given ideology or group.

In fact, Wiklund's ethos of justice seems even more important as we contrast it with Antoon De Baets' fourth chapter, revealing that historical consciousness and political wisdom rarely correlate. Indeed, looking for examples of "historian-kings", a variation of Plato's "philosopher-king", De Baets analyzes the historical consciousness of 188 world political leaders from 1900 to 2018. His analysis revealed that only four of them could be assigned the crown: Woodrow Wilson, Mikhail Gorbachev, Tomas Masaryk, and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Historical consciousness does not prevent ruling abuses or catastrophic decisions; neither can it be associated with one particular type of regime.

The second part of this book, comprising eleven chapters and an afterword by the late historian Georg G. Iggers (1926-2017), features both professional and amateur historians who have been politically engaged in various historical contexts. These contributions span the 20th century and range from Greece, China, Poland, Brazil, Japan and the United States. It is worth mentioning that the first receives greater attention, with five authors focusing on Greek case studies. Though it is not specified why those examples were selected and presented according to their appearance over time – especially given that they do not cover most regions of the world and that some countries are represented more than once – these chapters are nevertheless illuminating in order to grasp the potential benefits and limitations of historians' political commitment. They bring even more acute questions and layers of nuances to the prior philosophical section.

From those examples, one political form of engagement that clearly stands out is the historians' adherence or categorical rebuttal to the actions of governments. 1930's China's Zhanguo Ce Clique (Fan's Chapter, 6) constitutes a striking example where autonomy and search for "pure scholarship" in professional history, which flourished in times of freedom, later did not resist arising political tumult and historians' desire to influence the course of events. The instrumentalization of the past for nationalistic convictions highlights with *aplomb* why history has been so preoccupied with dissociating itself from political action. However, the reader should not assume that a historian's appraisal of or subversion against the state automatically equals an illegitimate form of political commitment. As Nina Witoszek writes in Chapter 8, the Polish Solidarnosc movement of 1980-1981 – which created a democratic polis in parallel to the communist regime and prepared the field that would host the smooth subsequent political transition – embodied a political commitment that set forth a "rationality with habits of the heart," the kind of "intellectuality of quality" Wiklund argues for in the second chapter.

Preservation and transmission of the past constitutes another motive leading historians toward political commitment. At least seven chapters of this book match this form of engagement by involving the protection of memory and of material traces. Notably, the reader takes from these that writing about a not-so-remote past, with witnesses alive and dealing with traumas, is a difficult task. To address those challenges, in Chapter 5, Emilia Salvanou stresses that historians should participate in the articulation of new shared narratives that include the once silenced voices. As well, Nina Schneider's framework in Chapter 10 gears the writing of narratives toward the respect of human rights. Vangelis Karamanolakis' Chapter 12 on the destruction of security files in Greece exposes how the historian's inaction or failure to act in the public sphere can result in dramatic outcomes. The safeguard of documents should never be overlooked, at the peril of seeing those disappear forever. Finally, Effi Gazi's Chapter 14 brings up new possibilities for historians to engage in the technological shift, blurring the frontiers between professional and amateur history. A closer look to these contributions discloses that history is not the prerogative of professional historians: The past and memory of that past are a public affair, as well.

In the 21st century, historians cannot deflect a reinvestigation of their epistemological beliefs. Philosophical debates are winning a more central place: Multicultural ideologies, postcolonial and indigenous *revendications*, LGBTQ communities' quest for recognition and rights all are forcing us to reconsider the general assumptions of our past practices. Thus, this publication constitutes a mandatory detour not only for the historians who wish to be politically engaged, but for anyone who deals with history daily. The professional who was already willing to embark on this path may find some convincing arguments. Conversely, whoever was hoping to avoid any form of political commitment may have to reconsider their position. ■■

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

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