

Comment

Is History a Threat?

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Erick Hobsbawm (d.2012) was a Marxist historian, a professor of history at Birkbeck College, University of London, where he taught till the end of his life. Birkbeck is an evening college where most of the students belong to the working class and continue with studies to improve their educational qualifications. Conscious of the condition of students who attended his lectures after a hard day of physical labour, he devised lectures on the history of Europe to create emancipatory thought. His four books use history as a tool to comprehend present-day Europe. They are titled *The Age of Capital*, *The Age of Industrial Revolution*, *The Age of Revolution* and *The Age of Extreme*. Besides these four books, he has published a number of papers and essays that attempt to build a new historical consciousness.

There are other progressive historians besides Hobsbawm who believe that history can be liberating if it is not written in the service of the rulers of the time. It is also not a static and depressing account of the past but is dynamic and constantly changing. While history tells the story of unjust rulers and the institutions they created, it also reveals how the rulers and their unjust institutions meet their end. The reign of absolute kingship where the king was considered the Viceregal God, brutal military dictatorships, and exploitative economic systems that lasted for centuries with the aim of torturing and subduing the common working people were all destroyed over time, especially when people joined forces and resisted them to gradually establish a just order.

Read carefully from the perspective of working class people, history is not a pessimistic account of the past but a way of looking forward to the future as a better time. This is the foundation of progressive historiography where individuals and nations are made responsible for making their own destiny. This outlook does not look at the past for guidance but encourages the reader to make a study of the present and make an effort for a better future.

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This progressive role of history is now subdued all over the world in the new millennium. American imperialism has now emerged as the military, economic, and political power that interferes in countries all over the world to extract its own benefits. In just the past decade we have witnessed American interference in the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen that have led to the complete destruction of these countries. Several other countries are under constant threat of military intervention and it is clear to everyone the American role in creating and supporting Israel to crush the local citizens, the Palestinian Muslims.

As a response to American imperialism we also witness the rise of terror groups who target western societies. These new religious and nationalist groups and political parties justify their acts of brutality with reference to the past and thereby use history to legitimize armed struggle. Therefore, we see that revivalist ideas are attracting those nations and peoples who are victims of European and American Imperialism. These extremist groups and parties believe that there was some perfect system in the past that needs to be restored to solve all existing problems. They deny the march of history and refuse to experiment with new ideas related to changing times to construct new systems.

At present, in most Muslim societies there are groups who believe that following the policy of terror and assassination is essential to “clean” and purge society of evil by eliminating everyone they disagree with. Sometime Nazi Germany is quoted as the ideal attempt to purify society by removing the Jewish community, many of whom were rich people, by either expelling them from the homeland or killing them. Many historians believe the concept of racial purity was used to dominate Europe but this racial ideology failed to achieve its end. Yet we see extremist groups in present times inspired by the Nazis. Terror is not the solution to imperialism and drawing on any mythic past for identity is a distortion of history.

Therefore, we find that there are two ways of reading history. One method looks at the past to plan for the future while the other method looks at the past in the hope of recreating it. In Pakistan, the regressive view of history is becoming popular among the people as well as among political and religious parties. The past is being constructed by television anchors and amateur historians, because everyone has a view on history. There is a lack of professional historians who are not partisan and employ research methodology to draw their conclusions. The glories of the past created by amateur historians are just wishful thinking on their part, with dangerous consequences.

It is in this way that history has become a threat to Pakistani society. What is taught as history in educational institutions is a

misrepresentation that is transforming the younger generation into narrow-minded bigots. Meanwhile, university students are not encouraged to critically evaluate the history of Pakistan. This submission to the official version of history that is changed by each passing regime is detrimental to historical consciousness.