

41. Should historians embrace or resist 'presentism'?

The debate over historical presentism can be interpreted as mirroring the debate between the scientific school, championed by Leopold von Ranke, and the Postmodernists, over the ability of historians to remove their influence from their works. Both sides go too far. History can never be totally scientifically objective. The selection and ordering of facts inherent in historical research necessitates the making of value judgements by the historian. Neither is it completely relativist, as there has to be basic grounding in fact so as to avoid the manufacture of pure fictions. This essay will take the view that historians can never fully remove themselves from their works, something aptly represented by E.H Carr's notion of history as a 'dialogue between past and present'.¹ Therefore, this essay will define presentism as the *conscious* anachronistic insertion and imposition of present ideas and perspectives on the historian's work. The three forms of presentism, as outlined by John Tosh², this essay will analyse are all conscious and controllable, able to be either embraced or resisted. Firstly, there is the history which selectively distorts the past to justify political positions in the present. Secondly, there is the history of the previously marginalised in society, presentist as it is largely born out of a political commitment to stimulate redress or change. Thirdly, there is the form which regards history as a trail of causation, weaving into historical discourse a teleological narrative. This essay will demonstrate that whilst presentism in the form of strongly politicised history, and the drawing of undue lines of causation should be strongly resisted, being something which predominately manipulates and misrepresents any historical narrative, a presentist history seeking to redress the phallocratic and Eurocentric nature of history is largely positive. Overall, presentism as a means of broadening and contemporising the historical discipline is constructive and should be embraced.

Lord Macaulay, the nineteenth century 'Whig' politician, and Slobodan Milosevic, President of Serbia from 1989 to 1997, may at first seem disparate figures. However, the two men are united by their common use of historical presentism to elicit false continuity for political purposes. In doing so, they

¹ E.H Carr, *What is History?*, (1987), pp.29-30.

² J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, (2002) pp.181-2.

falsified and mythologized the past. Lord Macaulay, in his seminal work, *The History of England*,³ flagrantly disregarded historical context, refusing to 'acknowledge the autonomy of the past'.⁴ Milosevic's Gazimenstan speech, intentionally delivered on the 28th of June 1989, so as to be on the 600th anniversary of Serbia's infamous defeat at the Battle of Kosovo, also discarded historical context, drawing a false continuity. Milosevic proclaimed to his countrymen that the Battle of Kosovo was a battle that 'we lost' as 'the Serbian people',⁵ suggesting that the people in front of him were somehow the same as those who had fought 600 years before. Similarly, Macaulay suggests that the seventeenth-century 'Whig' party was somehow connected in ideology with the 'Whigs' of the nineteenth century. Drawing such a false continuity, Macaulay was 'entirely political'⁶ in his judgements of historical figures. Trevor-Roper has rightly highlighted Macaulay's 'double standard of judgement'; he treated sources as authentic when they described the vices of the Tory John Churchill, but as 'Jacobite libels' when they criticized William III. Whilst strongly reprimanding James II for his 'degradation' of accepting financial assistance from the French, Macaulay played down the actions of the Whig Algernon Sidney when he did exactly the same as being merely an 'indelicate move'.⁷ Indeed, the critic J.W. Croker noted that the criticism of Sidney was 'so light as to sound like applause'.⁹ Whilst Macaulay was dogmatic and overt in his politicization of the past, Milosevic's speech was more insidious and calculated in its political motivation. A false continuity was solidified in the ritualistic parade of Prince Lazar's relics which preceded the speech, which almost sanctified the moment, projecting and enhancing the covenantal 'myth of rebirth and renewal'¹⁰ which characterized Serbian nationalism. In Serbian mythology, prior to the Battle of Kosovo, in a dream, Prince Lazar was approached by a grey hawk flying from Jerusalem and offered the choice between an earthly kingdom, implying victory against Sultan Murad I, or a heavenly kingdom, with Serbian defeat.¹¹ By promoting this myth, Milosevic suggested to his people that the troubles current in Kosovo were the beginnings of a prophesized turning point in Serbian history, where divine justice would finally prevail. Indeed, in referencing prior defeat Milosevic played into the 'historical nihilism'¹² of the Serbs, the anger from what was seen as prior unfair punishment, to stimulate united action in the present. Such presentist myth-making, however, distorts history. The

³ T.B Macaulay, *The History of England*,(1986).

⁴ H. Trevor-Roper, 'Introduction' , *The History of England*, p.29.

⁵ https://cmes.arizona.edu/sites/cmes.arizona.edu/files/SLOBODAN%20MILOSEVIC_speech_6_28_89.pdf

⁶ Trevor-Roper, 'Introduction', *The History of England*, p.30

⁷ *ibid.* p.30.

⁹ J.W Croker, *Quarterly Review*, Vol. lxxxiv (March 1849).

¹⁰ G. Schopflin, 'The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myth', *Myths and Nationhood* (London, 1997), pp.32-3.

¹¹ B. Hall, *The Impossible Country: A Journey Through the Last Days of Yugoslavia*, pp.235-90.

¹² A. Djilas, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer 1993), pp.81-96.

historiography of The Battle of Kosovo is uncertain as to whether Serbia was defeated at all: whilst both Robert Kaplan and James Marriott have determined that the Serbs were beaten, Tim Judah has judged the Serbians to have prevailed victorious and Noel Malcolm has proposed the battle was indecisive.¹³ Therefore, due to the influence of such presentism, history has been manipulated and re-forged, manufactured and perverted for political gain. Such deviation from what one might call historical truth is detrimental to the collation of an objective historical narrative and discourse, and must be strongly resisted.

It is important to recognize that these examples have been forms of a very strong political presentism. However, a less explicit political bias in the form of a view on the past from the broad societal perspective of the present can be far less damaging to historical accuracy, and actually expand historical discourse, adding nuance and encouraging debate. Martin Bernal, in *Black Athena*¹⁴, sought to challenge and overthrow the so called 'Aryan Model' of the origins of ancient Greece prevalent in eighteenth and nineteenth century historiography, by reviving the 'Ancient Model'. The 'Ancient Model' was propagated by Herodotus in the fifth century BC as the idea 'that Egyptians came to the Peloponnese and [...] made themselves kings in that part of Greece'¹⁵ at the end of the Heroic Age. The fact that the two playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides portrayed an indigenous population, the Pelasgians, being overcome by Danaos, leader of the Egyptian Danaids¹⁶, is evidence of the veracity of the 'Ancient Model'. Furthermore, the notion that Kadamos, a Semitic Phoenician, colonized Thebes was also salient, being clearly detailed by Diadorus Siculus¹⁷, as well as in Pausanias' *Guide To Greece*, written in the 2nd century AD.¹⁸ *Black Athena* was a work in which Bernal endeavoured 'to recognize the penetration of racism and 'continental chauvinism' in all our historiography', by exposing that the 'Ancient Model' was 'overthrown for external reasons'.¹⁹ Bernal accused the eighteenth and nineteenth century supporters of the 'Aryan Model' as being principally driven by racism and romanticism, or in other words, strong political presentism. Certainly, those who promoted the 'Aryan Model' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would have widely accepted the idea of biological superiority, following Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's

¹³ R. D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*, pp.35-6; J. A. R. Marriott, *The Eastern Question: An Historical Study in European Diplomacy*, p.65; T. Judah, *The Serbs*, p.31; Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History*, pp.75-9.

¹⁴ This essay will focus on *Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*.

¹⁵ Herodotus, *Histories*, VI.55.

¹⁶ Bernal, *Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, 'Black Athena' (1987) p. 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.111.

¹⁸ Pausanias, IX.5.1 (trans. Levi, vol. I, p.317).

¹⁹ Bernal, *Volume I*, 'Black Athena', p.2.

study of the crania in *fascicules as Decas craniorum* (Göttingen, 1790–1828), which supported the ‘degenerative hypothesis’: the notion that the original inhabitants of the earth were Caucasian, and that different races appeared through environmental degeneration. Romantic geographical determinism would have done nothing but affirm this ‘degenerative hypothesis’. Such anachronistic insertions by the ‘Aryanists’ on their histories were pejorative and distortionary, with political presentism leading to a curt rejection of previous evidence. The ‘Aryanists’ highlight the need to resist such strong political presentism.

Ironically, Bernal in his determination to disavow the ‘Aryan model’, was driven by the moral and ethical values of his own times. This led him to help globalise and expand views about the origins of Ancient Greece. However, Bernal’s values helped pave the way for radical Afrocentric histories on the topic. Bernal clearly acknowledged his presentism. He argued for the acceptance of his ‘Revised Ancient Model’,²⁰ because it was ‘more congenial [...] to the general liberal preferences of academia than [...] the Aryan Model’²¹. Evident in Bernal’s authorial intention is the distillation of the notions of multiculturalism and postcolonialism, ideas thoroughly in political and cultural vogue in the 1980s. Again, this is something Bernal himself notes: ‘The political purpose of *Black Athena*, is of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance’²³. Importantly, Bernal’s self-awareness punctuates the fact that his history was a form of a controllable presentism, thus making his work a justifiable study of this essay. Edward Said’s third form of Orientalism, that of ‘a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient’²⁴ is precisely the ‘European arrogance’ Bernal sought to challenge. Said railed against the cultural and political intent behind Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. Napoleon sought to restore Egypt from its supposed ‘barbarism to its former classical greatness’,²⁵ obliquely claiming European responsibility for its past greatness. In the same manner as Napoleon, the ‘Aryantist’ historians, according to Bernal, placed great weight on the idea that ‘Ancient Greece’, the ‘epitome of Europe’, had ‘racially pure’²⁶ origins, so as to affirm their view of a racial hierarchy and the image of Europeans as the harbingers of progress. By embracing a ‘Said-like’ model and trying to impose it on a study of Ancient Greece, Bernal placed emphasis on trying to discredit past histories which he deemed presentist. Ironically, despite being a work about denouncing one revisionist version of the origins of Ancient Greece, Bernal neglected to critically

²⁰ Ibid., p.7.

²¹ Bernal, *‘Black Athena’ and the APA*, Arethusa, vol.22 (1989), p.25.

²³ Bernal, Volume I, ‘Black Athena’, p.73.

²⁴ E. Said, *Orientalism*, p.3.

²⁵ Ibid. p.86.

²⁶ Bernal, *Volume I*, ‘Black Athena’, both quotes p.29.

respond to the revisionist Afrocentric historians who used *Black Athena* to support their radical interpretations. His work has been accused by Molly Myerowitz Levine of having 'moved the arguments of radical Afrocentrists from the wings to centre stage'²⁷, by not responding to them. This is also something Mary Lefkowitz has objected to, as she believes the Afrocentrists to have maintained their 'allegations' only 'by suppression or falsification of significant evidence'.²⁸ Bernal's seeming neglect to respond to radical Afrocentrists can be seen as evidence of his own presentism. Bernal stated 'though I don't care for black racism I don't think that it is a menace to society in the way that white racism is'²⁹, a stance mirrored in his lack of response to Richard King, who saw the ancient wisdom of the Egyptians to be rooted in their black biological makeup³⁰, or to G.G.M James's idea of a 'stolen legacy'.³¹ Perhaps it is harsh to criticise Bernal for failure to respond, considering he took time to reply to many other responses to his work.³² However, responsibility must be taken for the punchy and provocative title, 'Black Athena'. Clearly ambiguous, the title's reference to race stirred controversy as it left his work open to falsification or simplification, facilitating a radical Afrocentrist interpretation. Therefore, if historians are to write presentist histories which attempt to retell a marginalised or suppressed history, they must pursue absolute clarity in their work.

The sheer societal and temporal breadth of Bernal's thesis frustrated the emergence of definite conclusions, leaving his evaluations reliant on plausibility. This difficulty with societal history is something Bernal himself recognized: his argument was based on 'how much *more* [...] convincingly the Revised Ancient Model [could] describe the development and nature of Ancient Greek civilization than the Aryan Model'³³. He did feel able to reach an absolute conclusion, only wishing to convey 'a less inaccurate representation'³⁴. However, with a narrower focus - the examination of individuals - historians can use their presentism to reach more robust and objective judgements. Vilified amongst his white contemporaries, Jack Johnson, the former heavyweight boxing champion, was a victim of a heavily prejudicial society. A contemporary, Edward W. Gilliam, envisaged the black population 'bursting forth like an angry furious cloud' upon the social order, wreaking 'tumult and

²⁷ M. M. Levine, *The Use and Abuse of Black Athena*, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (Apr., 1992), p.459.

²⁸ Lefkowitz on Bernal on Lefkowitz, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 96.04.19 (debating Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*, (New York: New Republic and Basic Books, 1996)).

²⁹ M. Bernal, in Allen, 'Black Athena: An Interview,' 21.

³⁰ R. King, *The African Origin of Biological Psychiatry* (German town, Tenn., 1990)

³¹ G.G.M James, *Stolen Legacy* (2013), p.153.

³² See reference 24.

³³ M. Bernal, *Black Athena*, 2: 3

³⁴ M. M. Levine, *The Use and Abuse of Black Athena*, p.459.

disorder'. The apocalyptic vision stemmed from his calculation that America's black population would reach 192 million by 1980. 'The advancement of the blacks', according to Gilliam, would 'become a menace to the whites'³⁵. Such a pessimistic and abjectly racist view of blacks influenced what Randy Roberts summated as the 'hysterical' contemporary reaction to the bold and confrontational Johnson. He epitomised white fears, 'threaten[ing] order', as a 'nightmare of racial anarchy and chaos'.³⁶ Therefore, in our own times, where there is far less racial prejudice, the assessment of Johnson has been largely freed from racial lines with presentist reassessment proving constructive. Donald Trump's pardon of Johnson on the 24th of May 2018³⁷ displayed a more circumspect view, but was also an unsurprising presentist politicization, as he was looking to court favour from African Americans after winning just 8% of their votes in the 2016 Presidential Election.³⁸ However, whilst judgements of individuals can become more objective with temporal distance allowing context to be fully appreciated, the opposite can also occur. Whilst our dim view of racist attitudes has strengthened historians' capabilities for harsh presentist assessment, they must not wholly abjure figures who contradict modern values. Therefore, presentism which alleviates moral and ethical influences, allowing an objective and well-balanced judgement in mind of historical context should be embraced. However, presentism which adds a layer of moral and ethical judgement should be resisted. Mandell Creighton stated, 'I am hopelessly tempted to admit degress of criminality otherwise history becomes a dreary record of wickedness',³⁹ summating the need for circumspection and consideration of historical context.

Just as the reassessment of Jack Johnson has been undertaken to tell a more objective story of the previously marginalised, historians have looked to other unjust or uncharted areas of the historical discipline to do the same. Such an approach is presentist, relying on there being groups in the present that, whilst emancipated, hold a tenuous place in society which needs to be solidified in some way. Furthermore, such histories are often politically motivated - 'Contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward.'⁴¹ The growing primacy of gender as a concept in the 1970s and 80s led to a boom of

³⁵ E. W. Gilliam, *The African in the United States*, Popular Science Monthly, XXII (Feb., 1883), 441, 440.

³⁶ R. Roberts, *Galveston's Jack Johnson: Flourishing in the Dark*, Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Vol.87, No.1 (Jul., 1983), p. 44.

³⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/sports/jack-johnson-pardon-trump.html>

³⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-us-2016-37922587>

³⁹ Creighton to Acton in *Essays in the Study and Writing of History*, (1986) p. 390.

⁴¹ P. Verovsek, 'Collective memory, politics, and the influence of the past: the politics of memory as a research paradigm', *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 4/3 (2016), p.301.

research into gender history⁴², uncovering an area which had been largely latent. A key goal of gender history to Gerda Lerner was to challenge 'male dominated' history, by examining the concept of patriarchy. Lerner's view that 'patriarchy as a system is historical: it has its beginning in history', led to her reasoning that it could 'be ended by historical process'.⁴³ Her political goal of debasing the justification for a 'male dominated' world and encouraging female empowerment in the present is clear. Such histories are just as important in the present as the past, as they have a legitimising function. For instance, Itsue Takamura's, *A Study of Matrilocal Marriage*⁴⁴, which detailed how Japanese women would practice 'visiting marriage' (tsumadoikon) and thus have agency to choose their sexual partners up to the Kofun period (250-552), lent weight to the popular feminist slogan 'In the beginning, woman was the sun'⁴⁵. Presentist history can also allow the historian to uncover and challenge implicit assumptions. For instance, Karin Roseblatt analysed the Popular Front's attempts to turn working class men into stable husbands in Chile in the 1930s and 40s from the perspective of the male breadwinner paradigm. She argued that the Family Wage Act of 1952, which meant that married men were paid more than their single counterparts, institutionalised the notion that men were the breadwinners. The Act also challenged masculinity at the time, as 'non-marrying behaviour'⁴⁶ in the country was widespread. Presentist approaches which expand historical discourse, such as those taken in the field of gender history, allow for a critique of present societal structures and implicit assumptions without jeopardizing historical accuracy in the process. Therefore, presentist history which seeks to re-assess and more accurately portray the past, despite heavy political motivation, is something to be embraced, especially when that political motivation can increase the relevance and popularity of the profession, driving critique and higher standards of historical study.

By endeavouring to detail the history of the previously marginalised, the historian can also uncover a previously oppressed historical perspective. Although necessary to redress an unequal historiography, such an approach comes with inherent difficulties. For instance, the problem with the history of the Maori of New Zealand is that their perspective on the past is largely silent due to a reliance on oral history. 'The dominant interpretation' of The New Zealand Wars, to borrow James

⁴² D. Ko, 'Gender', *A Concise Companion to History*, p.203.

⁴³ G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York, 1986), p.6.

⁴⁴ D. Ko, 'Gender', *A Concise Companion to History* p.208.

⁴⁵ Slogan coined by feminist activist Hiratsuka Raicho (1886-1971) .

⁴⁶ N. Milanich, *Whither Family History?*, *American Historical Review*, 112/2 (2007), pp.439-58.

Belich's phrase,⁴⁹ was the narrative woven by the Pakeha (non-Maori) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to remember and celebrate the Maori for their martial and honourable characteristics, not for their dissent. The myth of the Maori as a martial race has been ably exposed by Franchesca Walker⁵⁰, whilst the notion of the Maori being the Empire's 'best blacks'⁵¹ has been, and remains, contested. Mangatitoki Cameron, a Waitara Maori Missioner who spoke at the 100-year commemoration of the battle of Waireka in 1960 declared that the conflict was 'the invisible rock, the cold heart, whose existence is betrayed by the surface ripples of narrowness, bigotry and intolerance however well-ordered our national life'.⁵² In doing so he displayed a conflicting memory to that of the British, and evidenced underlying Maori dissatisfaction. However the Maori standpoint has proved challenging to pinpoint as Angela Ballara has explained: 'non-kin cannot learn the inner dynamic of Maori past events and cultural phenomena and cannot be helped to a decision as to whether such knowledge belongs in the public arena or not'.⁵³ Therefore, the Maori voices historians do have access to, are of those who have sought assimilation into the Pakeha culture of memory, which one can assume leaves their views moderated so as to secure the loyalty of the British. Such challenges should not dismay historians from persevering with these hidden histories, because, as the current revisions of New Zealand historiography have shown, obstacles can offer a helpful reflective insight into the limitations of historians, allowing for a better understanding of history as a discipline.

As Maurice Halbwachs has put, the past is in many ways 'shaped by the concerns of the present.'⁵⁴ The creation of collective identities and nationalities has been a particularly pertinent concern for countries around the globe. Presentism then comes in the form of an attempt to chart the history of the origins of countries, to galvanise nationalistic unity in the present. The risk is of verging towards a strong political presentism which substantially distorts the past. In Zimbabwe, the need to shape nationhood and identity was particularly strong due the country's colonial past. Rhodes' invasion of the Ndebele Kingdom in 1890 was the start of foreign control, with Rhodesia becoming a British Crown Colony in 1923. Racial segregation, implemented most obviously in the form of Godfrey

⁴⁹ J. Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (Auckland, 1986), pp.311 - 321.

⁵⁰ F. Walker, 'Descendant of a Warrior Race': the Maori Contingent, New Zealand Pioneer Battalion, and Martial Race Myth, 1914-19', *War & Society*, 31/1 (2012), pp.1-21.

⁵¹ J. Belich, *Making Peoples: a History of the New Zealanders: from Polynesian settlement to the end of the nineteenth century* (Auckland, 1996), p.246.

⁵² M. Cameron, *Battle of Waireka Centenary Celebration Service* (New Plymouth, 1960), p.3.

⁵³ A. Ballara, *Iwi: The dynamics of Maori tribal organization from c.1769 to c.1945* (Wellington, 1998), p.12.

⁵⁴ M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992), p.25.

Huggins's 'two-pyramid policy',⁵⁵ silenced and subjugated the indigenous population. Therefore, when Rhodesia gained its independence on April 18th, 1980, as Zimbabwe, the political leaders required a fresh outlook for the new country to mobilise pride and unity amongst the populous. What was constructed by the 'intellectuals' of ZANU-PF and utilised by Robert Mugabe to evidence a united precolonial nation, which resisted external threats, Terence Ranger has labelled 'patriotic history'.⁵⁶ The first Chimurenga (war of resistance to British rule) and the 'ZANLA guerrillas in the second Chimurenga of the liberation war'⁵⁷ were the examples selected to display the empowering dissent in Zimbabwean history. Ironically, the man denouncing 'patriotic history', Ranger, actually initiated the movement. *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, and *The African Voice*, depict a romanticised precolonial Zimbabwe with Shona and Ndebele coordinated as a nation, something which Mugabe grasped to evidence a dynamic precolonial African nationalism.⁵⁸ However, this view of Zimbabwean heritage has been critiqued as a 'self-serving oversimplification of the country's past meant to legitimise ZANU-PF rule' by Alois S. Mlambo.⁵⁹ The Ndebele and Shona were actually deeply divided, with 'some of the bitterest armed clashes during the years of the liberation struggle' being between ZAPU (which was mainly Ndebele) and ZANU (which was predominately Shona). Therefore, the national unity portrayed in the 'patriotic histories' does not truly reflect the ethnic diversity and divisions of the precolonial and colonial history of Zimbabwe. Such presentist myth making is not isolated to Zimbabwe; in New Zealand, the attempt to form a national identity in 1914 by commemorating the Waikato Wars, distorted historical reality. The events commemorating the jubilee of the Battle of Orakau were organised by a committee of which there was only one Maori out of a group of 24, the token spokesman for the 'Native Race', leading to the production of an unrepresentative narrative.⁶⁰ Indeed, the opening speech from Mr John Fisher, Chairman of the Waipa County Council, fed into the myth of peaceful race relations, as he marvelled at the 'gradual fusion of the races'. Again, disunity and dissent in the past was ignored in order to justify national unity in the present. Overall, nation building tends to romanticise and distort the past, and thus presentism for nationalistic purposes should be resisted.

⁵⁵ A. S. Mlambo, *Becoming Zimbabwe or Becoming Zimbabwean: Identity, Nationalism and State-building*, Institute of African Affairs at GIGA, Hamburg/Germany p.57.

⁵⁶ T. Ranger, *Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: the Struggle over the past in Zimbabwe*, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, (July 2004) pp.505-10.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p.505.

⁵⁸ A. S. Mlambo, *Becoming Zimbabwe or Becoming Zimbabwean*, p.64.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.52.

⁶⁰ G. Mair, *Jubilee Souvenir of Battle of Orakau: fought March 31st, April 1st and 2nd, 1864: and in commemoration of 50 years of peace, 1864-1914* (Hamilton, 1914) p.1.

Presentism used to justify political action in the present has the danger of skewing the past. Macaulay, Milosevich, the ZANU-PF 'intellectuals', the New Zealand politicians of 1914 and the 'Aryanists' all consciously distorted history in order to fulfil and satisfy their political agendas. However, as gender history has displayed, historical standards do not necessarily have to be discarded when history is used for a political purpose. Whilst those who distorted history were driven predominately by a desire to legitimise their viewpoints, in the case of gender the desire was more for an expansion of the historiography by offering a new perspective. Indeed, similar expansion occurs with the uncovering of histories that were previously marginalised, such as with the current revision of Maori history and Bernal's attempt to reassert the suppressed 'Ancient Model'. Such expansionary presentism does broaden and contemporise the historical discipline, sometimes by highlighting the difficulties and flaws inherent within it. Ultimately, the conscious presentism analysed in this essay should only be embraced if it does not pervert or mythologise the past.

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