

## Democracy and Historical Writing

### Democracia y escritura de la historia

Antoon De Baets  
University of Groningen. The Netherlands  
a.h.m.de.baets@rug.nl

#### Abstract

In this essay, we try to clarify the relationship between democracy and historical writing. The strategy is first exploring the general relationship between democracy and historical awareness, and then, studying the relationship between democracy and historical writing itself to find out whether democracy is a condition for science in general and for responsible historical writing in particular. We also investigate the reverse relationship by testing four claims: the zero thesis, the mirror thesis, the amplifier thesis, and the midwife thesis. The aim is to discover under which conditions historical writing can help foment a democratic culture. We argue that a democratic society is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for sustained responsible historical writing. Conversely, responsible historical writing reflects democracy to a certain degree, because parts of its procedure are a practical demonstration of values central to democracy. It invests, however, less compromise and more quality control in its operation than the democratic process does. Plausible accounts of the histories of democracy and of historical injustice also strengthen democracy to a limited extent. The provisional historical truth sought after and presented, however, is not always accepted by the public. If it is, it may open old wounds; if it does not, by showing failures, it may undermine the promotion of democracy. Finally, rarely does historical writing *shape* democracy directly. We conclude, nevertheless, that as a precondition for a strong democratic historical awareness, hence for a democratic culture, the contribution of responsible historical writing, though limited, is necessary for the survival of democracy. They walk the same path to the end.

#### Key Words

Democracy, dictatorship, historical awareness, new democracies, restored democracies, responsible historical writing, science.

#### Resumen

En este ensayo, intentamos clarificar las relaciones entre democracia y escritura de la historia. Nuestra estrategia consiste en explorar las relaciones generales entre democracia y conciencia histórica, y en estudiar las relaciones entre democracia e historiografía, intentando averiguar si la democracia es una condición para la ciencia en general, y para la escritura de la historia en particular. También investigamos la relación inversa examinando cuatro afirmaciones: la tesis cero, la tesis reflejo, la tesis amplificador y la tesis factor-clave. El objetivo es descubrir en qué condiciones la escritura de la historia puede ayudar a fomentar la cultura democrática. Sostenemos que una sociedad democrática es condición necesaria, aunque no suficiente, para una

historiografía responsable que tenga un carácter sostenido. E inversamente: que una escritura de la historia responsable es reflejo de la democracia hasta cierto punto, porque las partes de su método son una demostración práctica de los valores esenciales de dicha democracia, aunque aquella implica menos compromiso y mayor control en la calidad de los pasos que da. Los relatos verosímiles de la historia de la democracia y de las injusticias históricas igualmente refuerzan la democracia en cierto modo. La verdad histórica provisional no siempre es aceptada en cambio por el público. Si lo es, puede abrir viejas heridas, y si no, puede minar la democracia al mostrar sus fracasos. Sostenemos también que raramente la escritura de la historia moldea directamente a la democracia. Concluimos sin embargo que, como precondition para una sólida conciencia histórica democrática y una cultura democrática, se necesita, pese a sus limitaciones, una escritura de la historia responsable, dado que ambas siguen el mismo camino.

### **Palabras clave**

Democracia, dictadura, conciencia histórica, nuevas democracias, democracias restauradas, escritura de la historia responsable, ciencia.

In this essay, I will discuss the relationship between democracy and historical writing. There are at least three ways to do this: by identifying broad historical developments that affected the emergence and development of the political system known as democracy and the place of historical writing in them; by picking some case studies and then try to infer general lessons from them; and, finally, by discussing ideal types of both democracy and historical writing from a theoretical perspective. I chose the third avenue in full awareness that it constitutes a limited approach to an almost inexhaustible topic with as many interpretations as scholars proposing them. Inevitably, my theoretical reflection will contain much speculation, but, I hope, not without a firm foundation in logical and, where possible and applicable, evidence-based arguments. Before entering, then, into a discussion of the relationship between the ideal types of democracy and historical writing, let me briefly define both concepts.

As for the notion of historical writing, I will look at an ideal type which I summarily call “responsible historical writing”. Historical writing is responsible when it is characterized by what Bernard Williams identified as the two basic virtues of truth: accuracy (to find truth) and sincerity (to tell truth).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth & Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 84-148. See also my *Responsible History*, 173-96.

All official UN documents mentioned here are available on the Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) website, unless otherwise indicated; all websites mentioned here were last checked on 15 February 2015. I presented lectures on this topic at the *2nd International Conference on Democracy as Idea and Practice* (Oslo, 2011), the *9th European Social Science History Conference* (Glasgow, 2012), the *3rd International Conference on Philosophy of History* (Buenos Aires, 2012), the *17th National History Symposium* (Natal, Brazil, 2013), and the *22nd EUROCLIO Annual Conference* (Helsingør, Denmark, 2015). I am grateful to panel attendees, particularly Toby Mendel (director of the Centre for Law and Democracy in Halifax), for their comments.

The ideal type of democracy is rooted in the human rights system. This needs a bit more explanation. It is well-known that the leading documents on human rights – the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the covenants derived from it – advocate a democratic society as the best political system to protect human rights.<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, the United Nations define a democratic society as a society that recognizes and respects the human rights set forth in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.<sup>3</sup> This definition, simple as it seems, is strong in fact because it requires any conception of democracy to be infused with a demanding human rights-oriented application of the rule of law. Such a definition is an ideal and, strictly speaking, no state in the world lives up to it.<sup>4</sup> In any case, this aspiration to closely link human rights and democracy has roots in history: both ideas emerged as the result of the so-called democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century but their mutual relationship has remained stern until perhaps the relatively recent collapse of Latin American dictatorships and the end of Communism and the Cold War.<sup>5</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that in the leading document on democracy, the so-called *Universal Declaration on Democracy*, the interconnectedness between democracy and human rights is as pervasive as in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Whereas the latter stipulates the core principles of democracy only, the former also highlights several of its conditions. These include freedom of expression, accountability and transparency. The declaration also adds: “A sustained state of democracy [...] requires a democratic climate and culture constantly nurtured [...] by education and other vehicles of culture and information”.<sup>6</sup>

Insight into the determinants of democracy is important for the problem I want to address here, the relationship between democracy and historical writing. My strategy is to first explore the general relationship between democracy and historical awareness.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) (1948), articles 21, 29; *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) (1966), articles 14, 21, 22, 25; *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) (1966), articles 4, 8. The UDHR preamble also strongly condemns past dictatorships. Access to the United Nations (UN) documents on democracy via <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/RuleOfLaw/Pages/Democracy.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> See UN Economic and Social Council, *Siracusa Principles on the Limitation and Derogation Provisions in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1985), principle 21; *Limburg Principles on the Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights* (1986), principle 55.

<sup>4</sup> For a theory of dignity and human rights-based democracy (called “the partnership conception of democracy”), see Ronald Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011), especially 379-99. Following José Antonio Cheibub, the UN Development Programme adopted a minimalist definition of democracy, endorsed by many for practical research purposes: “Countries are classified as democratic if the chief executive and legislature are elected, more than one political party competes in elections and a party has transferred power in the event of a loss; otherwise, countries are identified as dictatorships”. See *Human Development Report 2010* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), [hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-2010](http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-2010), 122 n. 15.

<sup>5</sup> See Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27-29, for the emergence of democracy in Western Europe and North America in the late eighteenth century; 48-49, for the connection between democracy and human rights. For background about how democracy was historically associated with political rights and freedom with civil rights, see Manfred Nowak, *U.N. Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: CCPR Commentary* (Kehl-Strasbourg-Arlington: N. P. Engel, 1993; reprint Kehl-Strasbourg-Arlington: N. P. Engel, 2005), 564-66. Nowak argued that the acceptance of the connection between democracy and human rights is a recent phenomenon.

<sup>6</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Universal Declaration on Democracy* (1997), preamble, articles 3, 6-9, 12-14, 19 (quote), 21, 27.

Then, I study the relationship between democracy and historical writing itself and try to find out whether democracy is a condition for science in general and for responsible historical writing in particular. I also investigate the reverse relationship by testing four claims which I shall call the zero thesis, the mirror thesis, the amplifier thesis and the midwife thesis. The aim is to discover how historical writing helps foment a democratic culture.<sup>7</sup>

### Democracy and historical awareness

Throughout history, scores of societies have displayed historical awareness, that is, a shared sensitivity toward the past as expressed in collective memory and historical knowledge. The presence of historical awareness since time immemorial is important here in two respects. It means, first, that historical awareness is much older than democracy. Long before modern democracies came into existence – roughly in the nineteenth century – societies possessed historical awareness, although it was often limited to elite groups. There are many theories about the conditions that arouse historical awareness,<sup>8</sup> and among the strongest are those that tell us that collective experiences of shame and pride are reliable (but not infallible) predictors of increases in historical awareness. When the identity of a people is threatened by defeat in war and by violent domination, when it is jeopardized by loss of roots, or, conversely, when it is boosted by freshly gained autonomy, historical awareness is fueled. In particular, the collective memory of historical injustice – by which I mean crimes of the past comparable to genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes – can stretch back centuries.<sup>9</sup>

The second point is less straightforward: given comparable levels of social-economic development, historical awareness is *only potentially* stronger in democracies than in nondemocratic regimes.<sup>10</sup> Nondemocratic rule cannot draw sufficient legitimation for its power from elections and laws. Therefore, it must seek legitimation elsewhere, often in an ideology that turns the past into its instrument. Nondemocratic rule usually imposes an official memory and tries to crush memories that challenge it. Many tyrants, therefore, show a keen interest in history. Their eagerness to censor history is proof *a contrario* of their historical awareness. In contrast, dissidents may refute the dictator's historical lies, even at the cost of persecution. In addition, the weak credibility of official versions of history directs the collective curiosity to the historical taboos. Substitutes for censored historical writing may rapidly emerge.<sup>11</sup> In short,

---

<sup>7</sup> I first broached the problem in Antoon De Baets, *Responsible History* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2009), 68-71, where I called responsible historical writing an “act of democracy” and “democracy in practice”, judgments qualified here.

<sup>8</sup> For an impression of historical awareness theories, see my “The Grandeur of Historiography”, *Storia della Storiografia*, 51 (2007): 141-47.

<sup>9</sup> See my “The Impact of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* on the Study of History”, *History and Theory*, vol. 48, 1 (February 2009): 35-38, and my “Historical Imprescriptibility”, *Storia della Storiografia*, 59-60 (September 2011): 131-32, where I distinguished remote from recent historical injustice (see: [www.inth.ugent.be/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Historical-imprescriptibility.pdf](http://www.inth.ugent.be/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Historical-imprescriptibility.pdf)).

<sup>10</sup> Throughout, I contrast “democracies” with “nondemocratic regimes” (encompassing authoritarian as well as totalitarian dictatorships) and “new or restored democracies” (the latter a UN term).

<sup>11</sup> See Antoon De Baets, *Censorship of Historical Thought: A World Guide 1945-2000* (Westport C, London: Greenwood Press, 2002). See also Leszek Kołakowski, “Totalitarianism and the Virtue of the Lie”, in Irving Howe (ed.), *1984 Revisited: Totalitarianism in Our Century* (New York: Harper & Row,

historical awareness can flourish under nondemocratic rule in many ways, despite the fact that public expression of its dissident forms is systematically forbidden.<sup>12</sup>

In their turn, democracies can also draw part of their legitimacy from the past by presenting themselves as a continuation of democratic precedents. In addition, in democracies with a multi-ethnic character, recollection of the past may bring comfort to alienated minorities.<sup>13</sup> History education at school is a generalized feature in democracies, but in itself it is not necessarily a reliable indicator of the levels of historical awareness among the adult population of a generation later. And information and debate fed by the media or by cultural outlets do not always make up for this. It is even striking how complaints about low levels of historical awareness abound in many democracies. It may be that these alleged low levels are relative because of our misplaced inclination to compare entire populations in democracies with just some elite groups in nondemocratic regimes. If that is true, then the alleged low levels of historical awareness in democracies are still higher than the alleged high levels of historical awareness under nondemocratic rule. Even if historical awareness in democracies is not low, however, or not in decline, its need not automatically strengthen democratic values. Only a *democratic* historical awareness will strengthen democratic values.

The in-between case of *new or restored* democracies may seem special from a transitional justice perspective, but it is not special from the perspective of historical awareness theory. In the last decades, the experience of new or restored democracies with truth commissions and tribunals repeatedly demonstrated that during a short period immediately following the downfall of nondemocratic regimes or the end of armed conflicts, there is a widespread fever to know the facts of what exactly happened with the victims of repression and violence. In addition, large sectors of society want to know how and why violence was organized and who were those responsible. Impressed by the powerful drive of new or restored democracies for knowledge about past suffering, the United Nations developed a so-called right to the truth: a new human right that stipulates that victims of human rights violations and their families have the right to know the truth about the circumstances in which the violence generated by the conflict took place and, in the event of death or disappearance, to know the victims' fate.<sup>14</sup>

This post-repression openness about the past is a strong example of the theory that experiences of shame about the past stimulate historical awareness. Such openness is a relatively recent phenomenon, however. There have been many post-repression transitions in the further past without exceptional moments of historical awareness: forgetting was the rule. Some presently consolidated democracies have lived surprisingly long without coping with the violent parts of their past or the distorted old versions of their history at all. Since the 1970s, the thinking about how to deal with impunity and reparation after gross injustice has markedly evolved. Even in this more

---

1983), 135; Yuri Afanasev, "Return History to the People", *Index on Censorship*, vol. 24, 3 (May-June 1995): 56-58.

<sup>12</sup> Lack of historical awareness was also the rule in the colonies, where European democracies usually imposed nondemocratic regimes on the population. For a classical analysis, see Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, transl. Howard Greenfeld (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991), 91-95, 102-5.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Stephen Jones, "Old Ghosts and New Chains: Ethnicity and Memory in the Georgian Republic", in Ruby Watson (ed.), *Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism* (Santa Fe, NM: University of Washington Press, 1994), 163-64, 165 note 29.

<sup>14</sup> See my *Responsible History*, 144-72, and "Historical Imprescriptibility", 128-49.



favorable international context, the urge for the truth does not appear in each and every new or restored democracy, and where it does the quest for historical truth can soon be shoved aside by competing goals like the need for stability and welfare. In addition, the risks of dealing with the painful past, though not as bad as under nondemocratic rule, are still considerable: it can reopen old wounds and revive old conflicts.<sup>15</sup> It has often been shown that intense but chauvinistic history education is a form of indoctrination that in the end can help ignite conflict and violence.<sup>16</sup> Under strict conditions, a moratorium on such education may be justified for a well-defined lapse of time.<sup>17</sup>

From this sketch, I conclude that democracies only potentially possess a stronger historical awareness than nondemocratic regimes. When it is stronger, it can erode. If it does not erode, it is not necessarily supportive of democracy. If, in contrast, a *democratic* historical awareness can be nurtured, it can lend support to a democratic climate and culture and so to democracy itself. Let us now see under which conditions historical writing helps foment a democratic historical awareness.

### **Democracy as a condition for responsible historical writing**

I shall first examine whether democracy is a condition for responsible historical writing. A preliminary question is whether democracy is needed for science.<sup>18</sup> Timothy Ferris has proposed the strong claim that in Europe and North America the democratic revolution and the scientific revolution have evolved together since the late eighteenth century. Carl Sagan has defended the even stronger claim that science and democracy began in the same time and place: Greece in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> For case studies, see Eric Davis, "The New Iraq: The Uses of Historical Memory", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16, 3 (July 2005): 54-68; Eric Langenbacher, "On the Connection between Memory and Democracy: The German Case and Beyond" (American Institute for Contemporary German Studies Commentary, August 2003).

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Kenneth D. Bush & Diana Saltarelli (eds.), *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Peacebuilding Education for Children* (Florence: UNICEF, 2000): 11-14, in: <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight4.pdf>; UNESCO, *The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education-EFA Global Monitoring Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 2011): 242-44, in: [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001907/190743e.pdf](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001907/190743e.pdf); Barbara Misztal, "Memory and Democracy", *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 48, 10 (June 2005): 1324-26; Elizabeth Cole (ed.), *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD, etc.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 325-26; E. H. Dance, *History the Betrayer: A Study in Bias* (London: Hutchinson 1960; reprint London: Hutchinson, 1964).

<sup>17</sup> Five conditions guarantee the democratic character of post-conflict history textbook moratoria: a legal framework, an explicit and short time span, a public debate, the effective preparation of new materials, and unimpeded academic historical research. See Antoon De Baets, "Post-conflict History Education Moratoria: A Balance", *World Studies in Education* (forthcoming 2015).

<sup>18</sup> The Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, Farida Shaheed, defined science as "[K]nowledge that is testable and refutable, in all fields of inquiry, including social sciences, and encompassing all research". See her *The Right To Enjoy the Benefits of Scientific Progress and Its Applications: Report* (2012). Michael Shermer defined science as: "[A] set of methods designed to describe and interpret observed or inferred phenomena, past or present, and aimed at building a testable body of knowledge open to rejection or confirmation". See his *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997; reprint New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 18.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Ferris, *The Science of Liberty: Democracy, Reason, and the Laws of Nature* (New York: Harper, 2010), 1-2; Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (London: Headline, 1996), 41. Paul Veyne asked whether the Greeks began to write history when democracy made them effective citizens. He maintained that the birth of historiography did not necessarily follow the

These attractive claims are untenable. Like historical awareness, science preceded democracy, as we presently understand it, in time. The investigative spirit is common to all cultures. In particular, the scientific revolution – originating in the seventeenth century and then already founded on strong antecedents – took place in a historical context of absolutism. In addition, it arose in England despite the political turmoil that characterized this country for most of the seventeenth century.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that science is not dependent on a democratic context to emerge and develop: it is viable in nondemocratic environments, although the latter lack many of the conditions for it to prosper. There is no relationship between democracy and the *possibility* of science.

While defending their grand theses, however, Sagan and Ferris presented convincing examples to prove a more modest claim: that the relationship between democracy and *lasting progress* in science is necessary.<sup>21</sup> Ferris, for instance, documented the sometimes spectacular failure of science in totalitarian environments.<sup>22</sup> The more modest claim holds to the extent that democratic societies are liberal, that is, guarantee a work environment that respects and protects the human rights that individual scholars need for their work, in particular freedom of expression.<sup>23</sup> All democratic states in the world have committed themselves to these goals by ratifying the United Nations Covenants: in doing so, they are required to develop a framework of laws and other measures to facilitate the right to science.<sup>24</sup>

Let us now look at democracy as a condition for responsible historical writing. The reasoning here is similar as for science. In principle, democracy is *not* a necessary condition for the possibility of responsible historical writing. Much responsible historical writing clearly preceded democracy or has existed in nondemocratic environments, albeit under unfavorable circumstances, on a limited scale, and often at great risk for the historian.

---

appearance of the state or the rise of political awareness. See his *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, transl. Mina Moore-Rinoluceri (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 77.

<sup>20</sup> Stevin Shapin demonstrated how the authority and codes of the English gentleman almost invisibly influenced the truth concept of seventeenth-century scientific culture. See his *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, London: Chicago University Press, 1994), xxv-xxxii.

<sup>21</sup> See also Robert Merton, “The Normative Structure of Science” (1942), in *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 269; Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), 90.

<sup>22</sup> Timothy Ferris, *Science of Liberty*, 191-235; also Carl Sagan, *Demon-Haunted World*, 249-52.

<sup>23</sup> This relationship should not lead to the fallacy that free expression alone guarantees scientific truth. The more free expression, the more likely the expression of erroneous and false opinions, but also the more likely the possibility of an open debate tending to encourage the early exposure of such opinions.

<sup>24</sup> ICESCR, articles 13 (education), 15 (culture and science). See also *Limburg Principles*, principles 16-34; *The Maastricht Guidelines on Violations of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1997), §§ 6-10; UN Human Rights Committee, *General Comment 25 [Participation in public affairs]* (1996), § 9; UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment 13 [Education]* (1999), §§ 43-48; *General Comment 17 [Productions of which one is the author]* (2005), §§ 25-35; *General Comment 21 [Participation in cultural life]* (2009), §§ 44-59. The authoritative *General Comments* distinguish several types of state obligations: obligations to respect (i.e., not to intervene), to protect (i.e., to prevent third parties from breaching rights) and to fulfill (i.e. to facilitate and to provide by means of legal, financial, promotional and other measures). *General Comment 21*, for example, prescribes, as an obligation to fulfill, in § 54(c): “The inclusion of cultural education at every level in school curricula, including history (...) and the history of other cultures, in consultation with all concerned”.

In general, however, nondemocratic rule tends to abuse and harm historical writing or marginalize it. In contrast, democracy fosters it or at least does not hamper it. In Europe, *professional* historical writing, infused by a coherent set of ethical rules (usually laid down in handbooks of historical criticism), has developed on a significant scale only from the early nineteenth century – that is after the demise of absolutism in the late eighteenth century and the rise of democracy and human rights. If democracy, then, does not constitute a necessary condition for the emergence of responsible historical writing, it does so for its sustained practice.

The general state obligations to protect human rights can be specified for the field of history. They mean that states should regulate such vital areas as freedom of information, data protection and privacy, reputation, copyright, archives and heritage, and hate speech and discrimination.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, they should facilitate historical research and teaching at all levels and stimulate science and culture. In the context of the right to the truth, they have a duty to investigate and punish past atrocities. In the realm of memory, they should facilitate – though not impose – the exercise of the right to mourn and commemorate in a dignified manner.<sup>26</sup> But not only states have obligations, also historians themselves have one inescapable political duty: if they want to encourage responsible forms of history, they should support democracy.<sup>27</sup>

### **Responsible historical writing as a condition for democracy**

Is responsible historical writing in its turn a condition for democracy? Let me first dwell an instant on science in general. A few thoughts on the influence of science must suffice. Roughly, four claims can be distinguished: science is sufficient for democracy; it is not sufficient but necessary; it is not necessary but important (though sometimes harmful); it is not important. With the exception of those exalting or debunking science, most observers would, I believe, firmly reject the first and the last claims. Sagan and Ferris pointed out that many of the eighteenth-century enlightened protagonists of democracy had an exceptional interest in science. In these formative stages of the development of democratic practice, science played an important role. This role has since become only more imperative. Consider the complexity and variety of public policies undertaken in modern democracies. Science often plays a dominant role in formulating the options on which these manifold policies are based (hence their name, evidence-based policies). Science has a respectable record in the service of democracy, despite its sometimes chaotic application in a political environment and despite the abuses it may be subjected to for private interests.<sup>28</sup> Most participants in the debate

---

<sup>25</sup> Archives play a special role to realize the democratic principles of accountability and transparency. See Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Study on the Right to the Truth* (2009), §§ 6, 13; International Council on Archives, *Universal Declaration on Archives* (2010); *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-recurrence*, Pablo de Greiff (2013). For the relationship between archives and the right to the truth, see OHCHR, *Report of the OHCHR on the Seminar on Experiences of Archives as a Means to Guarantee the Right to the Truth* (2011).

<sup>26</sup> Memory laws (laws that penalize the expression of opinions about historical facts) are *not* a part of these memory-related duties. See UN Human Rights Committee, *General Comment 34 [Freedoms of opinion and expression]* (2011), § 49.

<sup>27</sup> This is also explicitly stated in UNESCO, *Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel* (1997), § 27.

<sup>28</sup> See also the Center for Science and Democracy of the Union of Concerned Scientists at [ucsusa.org/center-for-science-and-democracy](http://ucsusa.org/center-for-science-and-democracy).



would probably settle on the view that science is important and often necessary for democracy.<sup>29</sup> Does this also hold for the relationship between responsible historical writing and democracy? To answer this question, I will examine four claims: that responsible historical writing has *negative or no effects* on a democratic society (the “zero thesis”), that it *reflects* the latter (the “mirror thesis”), that it *strengthens* the latter (the “amplifier thesis”), and, finally, that it *shapes* the latter (the “midwife thesis”).

The *zero thesis* is irreconcilable with the other three. Since there is evidence for at least two of the other theses, as I shall demonstrate, we can reject it. The zero thesis, however, helps remind us that the effect of historical writing, when it exists, is not necessarily considerable and, when it is generally positive, it could still be negative in particular side-effects.

The *mirror thesis* can be partially confirmed by pointing to the *parallels* between the operation of historical writing and the operation of political democracy.<sup>30</sup> In their work, historians use values that are central to democracy: freedom of expression and information (including plurality of opinions and tolerance of unconventional opinion) and a public and critical debate in which opinions are publicly tested, accepted or rejected. Although tradition is important in both historical writing and democracy, merit ultimately trumps origin in evaluating findings. The systematic doubt that is the basis of evidential tests in history finds a parallel in democratic politics, which by allowing and encouraging political opposition and public scrutiny of government also integrates the principle of uncertainty into its core. The tentative and open-ended character of the truth-seeking operation in history is paralleled by the experimental character of democratic policies. Furthermore, the practice of historians of presenting evidence in clearly accumulating steps and of logically explaining problems corresponds to the democratic requirements of accountability and transparency. And historical scholarship and democratic accountability are both self-corrective in that they possess the capacity to learn from mistakes.<sup>31</sup>

All these parallels suggest that the relationship between democracy and historical writing is *procedural*: the operation of historical writing reflects some values central to the operation of democracy.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps this conclusion was to be expected as the parallels were drawn from an idealized presentation of the practices of historical writing and democracy. It is, however, also mitigated by the fact that the parallels are far from perfect. While science and democracy both have an inherently experimental character, experiment in history is only possible to a small degree – unless one is prepared to call

---

<sup>29</sup> This is even more the case when technology, often the product of science, is also taken into account.

<sup>30</sup> The question of whether history departments and associations of historians are democratically organized is not included in this discussion.

<sup>31</sup> For the centrality of truth in science, see UNESCO, *Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel* (1997), § 33: “[T]he scholarly obligation to base research on an honest search for truth.” For the link between truth and human rights consider the following: prior to the recent introduction of the right to the truth (around 2005), truth as a concept was entirely absent from the most important human rights instruments (The UDHR, the ICCPR and the ICESCR do not mention the concept). The search for truth, as the intrinsic aim of science, has finally found a parallel in this right. For the link between democracy and the right to the truth, see OHCHR, *Study on the Right to the Truth* (2006), §§ 46, 56, and OHCHR, *Right to the Truth* (2007), §§ 16, 83. See also Amartya Sen, “Democracy as a Universal Value,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 10, 3 (1999): 1-17.

<sup>32</sup> See also Carl Sagan, *Demon-Haunted World*, 41-42, 87, 379; Timothy Ferris, *Science of Liberty*, *passim*.

the testing of hypotheses with unique, nonreplicable evidence a form of experimentation. My assumption, nevertheless, is that the parallels are not superficial in that they lay bare the democratic elements in the infrastructure of responsible historical writing. The parallels are clearest for historical research but less obvious for history education or forms of historical popularization. Only to the extent that teachers, history textbooks or classroom discussions display research characteristics, do the same parallels appear.

Historical writing and democracy also show two important procedural differences: the role of compromise and the place of quality control. Compromise is central to politics but secondary to science. At the level of statements of fact, the level at which truth tests are possible, scholars avoid compromise. The “consensus theory” – true is what the majority of scholars think is true – fails at this level. At the level of statements of opinion, in contrast, compromise is sometimes possible: historical interpretations and moral judgments are not true or untrue but more or less plausible. And, within certain margins compromise about plausibility is possible.<sup>33</sup> Systematic quality control is another differentiating factor. Apart from an important phase of brainstorming during the pre-publication stage, the expression of opinions in science, including historical writing, is checked by a system of peer review. This renders the scientific debate far more regulated than the public debate; but once scholars accept this control of quality, their right to heresy is considerable.<sup>34</sup> In sum, historical writing is also characterized by procedures that deviate from democracy.

The *amplifier thesis* makes a bolder claim. It maintains that responsible historical writing not only reflects but also strengthens a democratic society – beyond the point that merely reflecting democracy is already a way of strengthening it. It is reasonable to suppose that responsible historical writing, if it strengthens democracy, must be related not merely to its procedure but also, and more so, to its content. Not just to any content, but to some democracy-related content. From the section about historical awareness, two domains emerged as candidates to fulfill this condition of democracy-linked content: accounts of the history of democracy and accounts of historical injustice. Let us therefore see now how historical literacy in these two domains may boost democracy.

Obviously, the first domain is the study of the history of democracy. A democratic society, including its younger generations, needs to understand the origins and development of the democracy in which it lives to diagnose its present condition and to debate about guarantees for its future. In other words, it must develop a strong democratic historical awareness, that is, an enduring sense of continuity with democratic precedents and discontinuity with nondemocratic precedents in its history. If

---

<sup>33</sup> See also John Zammito, “Historians and Philosophy of Historiography”, in Aviezer Tucker (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 74.

<sup>34</sup> See also Williams, *Truth & Truthfulness*, 217 and 219. Also note that academic freedom is not the same as free expression. See my “How Free Expression and Academic Freedom Differ”, *University Values*, 3 (January 2011), [scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/documents/UV\\_JAN\\_2011.pdf](http://scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/documents/UV_JAN_2011.pdf), and my “The Doctrinal Place of the Right to Academic Freedom under the UN Covenants on Human Rights: A Rejoinder”, *University Values*, 5 (May 2012), [scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/documents/UV\\_MAY\\_2012.pdf](http://scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/documents/UV_MAY_2012.pdf); Ronald Dworkin, “We Need a New Interpretation of Academic Freedom”, in Louis Menand (ed.), *The Future of Academic Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 184-85; Eric Barendt, *Academic Freedom and the Law: A Comparative Study* (Oxford and Portland, OR: Hart, 2010), 17-22.

such an account lacks, there is room for the distortion and abuse of history.<sup>35</sup> This takes society further away from democracy.

Dealing with historical injustice, the second domain, is a core theme of any democracy as well. The United Nations emphasized that a people's knowledge of the history of its oppression is a part of its heritage that should be remembered; they called the inclusion of an accurate account of past human rights violations in educational material a form of symbolic reparation of injustice.<sup>36</sup> In general, it can be said that not dealing properly with past injustice – by not investigating and not punishing it – continues that past injustice; continuing past injustice increases the risk of recurrence of conflict and of nondemocratic rule and so permanently threatens the existence of democracy. As Reinhold Niebuhr said: “Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary”.<sup>37</sup>

It has been convincingly shown that the greater the grievances about past injustices are, the greater the potential for leaders of communal or political groups to initiate collective punitive action.<sup>38</sup> The general democratic duty to deal with historical injustice includes a so-called state duty to investigate past atrocities. It is here that responsible historians, next to states, have an important role to play. Views of historical injustice often differ sharply within a single society and give rise to multiple forms of historical awareness. When historians offer plausible interpretations of historical injustice, put into the context of the conflicts and nondemocratic regimes in which it was inflicted, they disentangle the official versions of history and the widespread secrecy, silence and lies that prevailed during this repressive past. Unveiling secrecy and breaking the silence mean exposure, attacking lies means refutation, dismantling distorted official versions means broadening the interpretation frame to include the perspective of society at large, including the victims. In so doing, historians help discontinue important aspects of historical injustice.<sup>39</sup>

Accurate and plausible accounts of the history of democracy and of historical injustice, then, strengthen democracy. The reception of these accounts by the public, however, can undermine the latter's democratic effect. First, it is a fact of life that the

---

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the demarcation between responsible history on the one hand and irresponsible history, the abuse of history and pseudohistory on the other, see my *Responsible History*, 11-14.

<sup>36</sup> UN Commission of Human Rights, *Updated Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity* (2005), principle 3; UN, *Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law* (2005), principle 22 (h). See also Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights (Farida Shaheed), *Cultural Heritage: Report* (2011), paragraph 8.

<sup>37</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944; reprint Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xxxii. See also Kenneth Christie and Robert Cribb (eds.), *Historical Injustice and Democratic Transition in Eastern Asia and Northern Europe: Ghosts at the Table of Democracy* (London, New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 4.

<sup>38</sup> See Barbara Harff and Ted Gurr, “Systematic Early Warning of Humanitarian Emergencies”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 35, 5 (September 1998): 558-59, also 575, 577-78.

<sup>39</sup> See also Thomas Hammarberg (former Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe), “Atrocities in the Past Must Be Recognised, Documented and Learned from – but Not Distorted or Misused for Political Purposes”, <http://www.deutscharmenischegesellschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/COE-Commissioner-for-Human-Rights-Thomas-Hammarberg-20100322.pdf>.

availability of reliable research findings does not imply their automatic and enlightened acceptance by the public. Second, revealing painful truths about the past may reopen old wounds and revive old conflicts. This may eventually discourage part of the audience to embrace democracy. Third, the findings of historians can be very well at odds with the promotion of human rights and democracy. Indeed, historical research and teaching may show the success of human rights but just as easily their failure, and the strength of democracy but just as easily its weakness – and, by the same token, the attraction of nondemocratic alternatives.<sup>40</sup> Conversely, awareness of the fragile and temporary character of democracy can also stimulate the determination to defend it. I conclude that the contribution of responsible historical writing to strengthening democracy is substantive rather than procedural *when* it deals with the study of democracy and of historical injustice, and *although* democratic effects can be mitigated or even eliminated depending on its reception.

The *midwife thesis*, finally, holds that responsible historical writing, beyond reflecting and strengthening democracy, also shapes it as the dominant factor. There are defining moments in the life of a democracy in which the debates about history mark the public mind. We noted that this is most clearly seen in new or restored democracies, which are often characterized by a brief period of thirst for knowledge about the recent past. The vehicles for assuaging this thirst are truth commissions and tribunals but rarely historical writing. Historical writing typically needs more time and therefore usually comes too late to influence the first debates about recent injustice. The findings of historical works rarely set the agenda of democratic states and, if they do, only for a fleeting moment. It is true, however, that the value of historical works may be significantly enhanced in countries where the process of transitional justice does not take place immediately but with a generation's delay. But in general the claim that historical writing is the midwife of democracy is weak. Its real impact is structural rather than incidental.

## **Conclusion**

A democratic society is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for sustained responsible historical writing. Conversely, responsible historical writing reflects democracy to a certain degree, because parts of its procedure are a practical demonstration of values central to democracy. It invests, however, less compromise and more quality control in its operation than the democratic process does. Responsible historical writing also strengthens democracy to a limited extent, when it presents plausible accounts of the histories of democracy and historical injustice. The provisional historical truth sought after and presented, however, is not always accepted by the public. If it is, it may open old wounds; if it does not, by showing failures, it may undermine the promotion of democracy. Finally, rarely does historical writing shape democracy directly. Nevertheless, the contribution of responsible historical writing to democracy, though limited, is necessary. There is no choice. For its own survival, a

---

<sup>40</sup> See for this dilemma also Ian McKellar, "History Teaching: A Key to Democracy?" *EUROCLIO Bulletin*, 6 (Summer 1996): 22-24 (at: [euroclio.eu/new/index.php/1996-history-and-democracy-bulletins-358](http://euroclio.eu/new/index.php/1996-history-and-democracy-bulletins-358)). In his keynote lecture in Oslo, "Education and Democratization in Comparative Perspective", Cheibub argued that education generally is crucial for the *emergence* of democracy, but less so for its *survival*; I claim here that responsible historical writing and education is crucial for both.

democratic society must facilitate a solid framework in which reliable and plausible accounts of the past are offered to the public. Without such historical accounts no strong democratic historical awareness is possible, without such awareness, the democratic culture is weakened, if not jeopardized, and so is democracy itself. The burden of the concomitant duties is shared by the state, the historians and society at large. Responsible historical writing and democracy walk the same path to the end.

### **Profile**

Antoon De Baets is professor of History, Ethics and Human Rights at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He has written more than 160 publications, mainly on the censorship of history and the ethics of historians. His work includes several books, *Responsible History* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009) being the latest. Since 1995, he has coordinated the Network of Concerned Historians (<http://www.concernedhistorians.org>). At present, he is completing a new book, *History's Blank Spots: Censorship of the Past around the Globe (1945-Present)*. Other topics he is working on include: historians and archivists killed for political reasons; the subversive power of historical parallels; post-conflict history textbooks moratoria; posthumous privacy and reputation; intergenerational awareness; iconoclastic breaks with the past; history-related complaints before the United Nations; the legal framework of historical writing; and a theory of free expression about the past.

Antoon De Baets es profesor de Historia, Ética y Derechos Humanos en la Universidad de Groningen (Holanda). Tiene escritas más de 160 publicaciones, principalmente sobre la censura en la historia y la ética de los historiadores. Su trabajo incluye varios libros, siendo el último de ellos *Responsible History* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009). Desde 1995 coordina el Network of Concerned Historians (<http://www.concernedhistorians.org>). En la actualidad está terminando un nuevo libro, *History's Blank Spots: Censorship of the Past around the Globe (1945-Present)*. Otros temas en los que está trabajado incluyen: los historiadores y los archiveros asesinados por razones políticas; los paralelismos históricos del poder subversivo; los aplazamientos en la redacción de manuales de historia tras los conflictos; la privacidad y la reputación póstumas; la conciencia intergeneracional; las rupturas iconoclastas con el pasado; las reclamaciones de raíz histórica formuladas ante las Naciones Unidas; el entramado legal de la escritura de la historia; y una teoría de la libre expresión sobre el pasado.

Fecha de recepción: 27 de abril de 2015.

Fecha de aceptación: 18 de febrero de 2015.

Fecha de publicación: 30 de junio de 2015.

Para citar este artículo: Antoon De Baets, "Democracy and Historical Writing", *Historiografías*, 9 (enero-junio, 2015): pp. 31-43.

<http://www.unizar.es/historiografias/historiografias/numeros/9/debaets.pdf>