

# A Little History is a dangerous thing

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5 November 2005

E.H. Gombrich, *A Little History of the World*, translated by Caroline Mustill, Yale, £14.99

The right-wing British historian Andrew Roberts recently reviewed a history book for children that, he warned, “ought to be kept well away from schools.” The book in question was E.H. Gombrich’s *A Little History of the World*, which Roberts condemned as “an unrestrained paean to Marxism-Leninism.”

Roberts’ article in the *Financial Times* [1] declares it “a tragedy that a writer as impressive as Gombrich, with the gift of being able to communicate with children, should have prostituted his talents in the service of so foul a creed as Marxism-Leninism.”

Surely this cannot be the same E.H. Gombrich that wrote *The Story of Art*, *Art and Illusion* and *The Sense of Order*. When he died in 2001 at the age of 92 Gombrich was widely hailed as the greatest art historian of the age, but no one suggested he was a communist. There was no reason to do so.

Gombrich was the friend of Karl Popper and, along with the economist Friedrich Hayek, had been one of his closest intellectual associates since their early days as young Viennese exiles in London. Along with Hayek, Gombrich found a publisher for Popper’s book the *Open Society and Its Enemies* and helped him get this anti-Marxist work through the press.

Gombrich was known as “Saint Ernst” by those who appreciated his role in establishing Popper’s reputation as a Cold War philosopher. He always saw his own work on art history as a vindication of Popper’s positivist theory that knowledge proceeded through a process of hypothesis and refutation. He was highly critical of the left-wing art historian Arnold Hauser, who had been a member of the Sunday Circle that formed around György Lukács in Budapest. Hauser, according to Gombrich, was caught in the “mousetrap of dialectical materialism.” [2]

When he died Gombrich’s credentials as an anticommunist were impeccable. By what strange transfiguration did he become a Marxist?

What Roberts objects to, and what makes him call Gombrich a Marxist, is Gombrich’s strong sense of injustice in the face of class oppression. Roberts cannot stomach the way that Gombrich criticizes the *ancien regime* and defends the French Revolution that overthrew it. Nor can he tolerate the fact that Gombrich voices his indignation at the impoverishment of workers under capitalism.

Under the *ancien regime* in France, Gombrich writes, “The peasants worked till they dropped, and citizens were forced to pay huge taxes.” In the countryside noble landowners would “rampage across the land after hares and foxes, their horses’ hooves trampling the carefully tended fields. And woe betide the peasant who protested! He would be lucky to escape with a few blows across the face from his lord’s riding whip, for a noble landowner was also his peasant’s judge and could punish him as he pleased.”

As a final resort there was an arrest warrant signed by the King, in which “The nobleman wrote in the name himself, so that anyone who displeased him for any reason whatsoever was simply made to disappear.” The French Revolution, Gombrich makes clear, was a response to this oppression. The National Assembly created by the revolution, “wanted the principles of the Enlightenment to be put into effect in their entirety—in

particular the one which said that reason, being common to all men, meant that all men were equal and must be treated as such under the law.”

This seems to be an admirably clear summary of the causes and consequences of the French Revolution for eight year olds.

Gombrich’s account of the effects of capitalism and industrialisation on workers is just as unequivocal. A mechanical loom, he explains, would “do more work than a hundred trained weavers. So whatever became of the weavers in a town into which a mechanical loom was introduced? The answer is that they woke up one day to discover that they weren’t needed any more.... Thanks to the new machines, the money that had allowed a hundred weavers to live safely and comfortably could now be saved by the factory owner, or spent on himself.”

He writes, “And so weavers, blacksmiths, spinners and cabinet-makers sank ever more deeply into misery and destitution, running from factory to factory in the hope of earning a few pennies.”

Their first response to this situation was to smash the machines, but “Some people felt that things could not go on like this. It was simply not right that a person, just because he happened to own, or had perhaps inherited, a machine, should be able to treat everyone else more harshly than many noblemen used to treat their peasants. It seemed to them that factories and machines and such like, which gave their owners such monstrous power over other people’s lives, shouldn’t belong to individuals, but to the community as a whole. This idea is called socialism.”

Gombrich then devotes two pages, which is a lot in a book of less than 300 pages that has to cover the whole of world history from the Neanderthals to the twentieth century, to an account of Karl Marx and the *Communist Manifesto*. This, along with the picture he paints of class oppression in capitalist society and pre-revolutionary France, is enough to make Roberts denounce the book and call for it to be banned from schools. Roberts is furious that, even when he revised the book in 1995, Gombrich made no mention of Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot, as though these were the natural heirs of Marxism. Roberts seems to think that nothing short of a denunciation of Marx as the progenitor of a murderous creed that led to all the horrors of the twentieth century would make the book fit for use in schools.

By no stretch of the imagination was Gombrich a Marxist. Even when he wrote the book as an unemployed postgraduate, he did not agree with Marx. In 1848, he explains to his young readers, “the situation was very different from what he [Marx] had expected. And things have gone on being different right up until today.”

Unlike Popper who briefly joined the Communist Party, there is no evidence that Gombrich was ever drawn to Marxism. But he knew that it would be impossible for a child to gain an adequate understanding of the history of the twentieth century without an account of Marx, socialism and the Russian Revolution.

Even after he revised the book in 1995, Gombrich still described the Russian Revolution as “a glimmer of hope” in a Europe where “there was hardly anything to eat, no clothes, no coal and no light. Women had to queue for hours in the cold to buy the smallest piece of bread or a half-rotten potato.” Here he was writing from personal experience. As children

he and his sister were sent to a foster family in Sweden because they were among the many starving and malnourished in war-torn Europe.

For Roberts, Gombrich's view of Marxism and twentieth century European history is completely unacceptable and makes *A Little History* too dangerous to be allowed near impressionable young minds. It is a measure of how far to the right official opinion has moved, even since Gombrich died, that this is so. The opinion of a highly cultured, well educated and humane young Austrian, expressing political and social views that were widely held in the 1930s, is now regarded as something worthy of censorship.

Perhaps Gombrich leans a little too much towards under-consumptionism in his analysis of the way in which capitalist crises develop and cause wars. But since it is rare in any book aimed at children to see a discussion of economics, let alone imperialism and militarism, that criticism might be held in abeyance.

In many respects Gombrich's book was more accurate than he knew. When he revised it in 1995 he added a chapter in which he discussed how his views had changed. One correction he wanted to make was that in discussing the impact of industrialisation he felt he had been somewhat one sided in only describing the way in which workers were impoverished. There had been immense suffering in the past, but greater productivity that industrialisation created now meant that "most people who work in factories and even most of the unemployed live better today than many medieval knights must have done in their castles."

The benefits of the postwar welfare state and mass production impressed him enormously when he compared them to the level of poverty and social inequality he saw when he was growing up between the two world wars. He describes how uncomfortable it made him feel as a student in Berlin when he saw houses with signs saying, "Entrance for Gentlemen and Ladies only," while servants and tradesmen had to go round the back. "Thankfully, all that is over now like a bad dream."

Reading *A Little History* at the beginning of the twenty-first century, even the youngest readers who can operate a television remote control will recognize that the "bad dream" which Gombrich thought gone forever is unmistakably back. Social inequality is at a level unknown since the 1930s. Social gains have been eroded and life expectancy is falling for many sections of society. Gombrich's analysis of the way in which workers' wages are driven down under capitalism stands up to examination better than he thought.

In his revised version, Gombrich also wanted to correct a point he had made about President Woodrow Wilson. Originally, he had said that Wilson had reneged on promises of a just peace that he had made in early 1918. Later Gombrich felt he could no longer suggest that Wilson had deceived the German people because Hitler had manipulated their feeling of injustice to mobilise support for the Second World War.

What Gombrich was referring to was Wilson's 14 points speech, which he delivered to a joint session of Congress in January 1918. Wilson's diplomacy was, as Leon Trotsky said, "a mixture of knavery with democratic piety" and the 14 points speech was a fine example of the type. Up until the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, Wilson had been beguiling the Provisional Government with "fresh credits and the commonplaces of pacifism" [3] into maintaining the Eastern Front. Wilson and his allies were thrown into a panic when the Bolsheviks came to power and declared an end to the war. [4]

When the allies refused to join in the peace talks at Brest Litovsk, Trotsky appealed to the workers of Europe and the rest of the world over the heads of their governments. He wrote, "We conceal from nobody that we do not consider the present capitalist governments capable of a democratic peace. Only the revolutionary struggle of the working masses against their governments can bring Europe near to such a peace. Its full realization will be assured only by a victorious proletarian revolution in all capitalist countries."

The Soviet government, Trotsky wrote, had a dual task, "in the first place to secure the quickest possible cessation of the shameful and criminal slaughter which is destroying Europe, secondly, to help the working class of all countries by every means available to us to overthrow the domination of capital and to seize state power in the interests of democratic peace and of a socialist transformation of Europe and of all mankind." [5]

US Secretary of State Robert Lansing wrote to Wilson warning that Trotsky's "presentation of peace terms may well appeal to the average man, who will not perceive the fundamental errors on which they are based." Revolution, he went on, was a "very real danger in view of the present social unrest throughout the world." Germany with its large working class parties was especially vulnerable to Trotsky's appeal. [6]

The 14 points were an answer to Trotsky. [7] They echoed many of the Bolsheviks' policies. According to Wilson, the United States rejected all secret diplomacy—Trotsky was publishing all the discussions at the Brest Litovsk talks. There was to be national self-determination—the Bolsheviks had promised that they would support the self-determination of all oppressed nationalities. "The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come," Wilson declared in point VI, "will be the acid test of their good will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy."

Wilson's 14 points speech was an attempt to drive a wedge between the Russian people and the Bolsheviks. In this he failed. As the Fourth all-Russian Soviet Congress was meeting in March 1918 to consider the Brest Litovsk treaty, Wilson dispatched a telegram assuring the delegates in the most fulsome language that the US supported Russia's "complete sovereignty and independence" but could not at that very moment render "direct and effective aid." The delegates replied with a telegram that expressed their appreciation to the American people, but went on to look forward to the day when they would overthrow their present system of government. Wilson had got a slap in the face. [8]

The "acid test" proved to be a fraud. The fine words Wilson put forward at the beginning of the year amounted to nothing by the time the Versailles peace talks began at the end of the year. The great powers carved up Europe in the traditional imperialist manner behind closed doors as they attempted to overthrow the Soviet government by military means and revolutions elsewhere were drowned in blood. Gombrich was right to consider that Wilson had been duplicitous even if the precise character of that duplicity was not clear to him. He was certainly more right than he knew about the Russian Revolution being a glimmer of hope for a Europe bled white by war. Remarkably, though it was eventually destroyed by Stalinism, that hope was kept alive for far longer than anyone at the time, even the Bolsheviks themselves, could have imagined.

Roberts writes for the *Sunday Telegraph* and the *Spectator*. His book *Eminent Churchillians* [9] made his name as one of the "angry young historians" of the new right who were attacking the established reputations of leading representatives of the British ruling class whom they blamed for the UK's decline.

In *What Might Have Been* [10] he developed another of the themes of recent right-wing history—the theory that luck is the basic factor in historical causation. From this lofty eminence Roberts identifies a number of what he regards as factual errors in Gombrich's book in an attempt to back up his tirade against it. There are some, it is true. But considering the book was written in the space of six weeks, they are remarkably few and are of a kind that tends to add to the book's value as a source of cultural wisdom. For example, it may not be factually true that, when forced to renounce his theory that the earth went round the sun, Galileo muttered under his breath, "And yet it moves," but any child will be culturally richer for knowing the story.

A great part of the appeal of the book is that its intimate, conversational

style makes reading it rather like being told stories by a favourite grandfather. It is not necessary that every child agrees with the political views of its grandfather. Nonetheless the stories the grandfather tells may be the starting point of an intellectual process that leads to the development of a critical historical understanding and an engagement with the great issues of our time. *A Little History* offers every child a surrogate grandfather of incontestable culture and humanity. For that reason no Marxist would declare, as Roberts has done, that this book should be kept away from children. Even though Gombrich was not a Marxist this is a book that will enliven family discussions in many households of our own readers.

**Notes:**

1. *Financial Times*, 23/09/05
2. E.H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, Phaidon, 1963
3. Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* [www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1930-hrr/ch18.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1930-hrr/ch18.htm)
4. Donald E. Davis, *The First Cold War: the Legacy of Woodrow Wilson in US-Soviet Relations*, University of Missouri Press, 2002, p. 58
5. quoted in E.H. Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia*, vol. 3, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-23*, Penguin Books, 1984, p. 41
6. Georg Schild, *Between Ideology & Real Politics: Woodrow Wilson & the Russian Revolution, 1917-1921*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1995, p. 57
7. *ibid.* p. 16
8. Davis, *ibid.*, p. 111
9. Andrew Roberts, *Eminent Churchillians*, Phoenix Press, 1994
10. Andrew Roberts, *What Might Have Been*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2004



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