

Vegetables Don't Have a History

A conversation with historian John Lukacs.

interview by Donald A. Yerxa and Karl W. Giberson

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Perhaps best known for his book *Historical Consciousness: Or, The Remembered Past*, John Lukacs has ranged far and wide as a historian. His two most recent books, both published by Yale University Press, are *A Thread of Years* (1998), a series of imaginative vignettes of everyday life in the twentieth century, and *Five Days in London, May 1940* (1999), focused on Churchill and his cabinet. Lukacs's 1990 book, *Confessions of an Original Sinner* ("not a history of my life," he explains at the outset, but rather "a history of some of my thoughts and beliefs"), includes an extraordinary meditation on "the evocative power of certain dates." For instance: "I remember that when I read that Greta Garbo had begun her acting career in Stockholm in 1916, an entire slew of associations and images flew into my mind. Stockholm in 1916: how must it have been in that neutral hyperborean city then, with its dark three-storied houses, white islands, pearly sky, a foggy bath of pale electric lights, high-wheeled box-like Adler automobiles crunching forward in the snowy streets, Germanophile patricians in their high-crowned felt hats and fur-collared coats; how did those Swedish people live then, what did they think?"

In March of *this* year, Lukacs spoke at Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, Massachusetts, where Donald Yerxa and Karl had a chance to talk with him.

Yerxa: In your writings you describe yourself variously as a reactionary, a bourgeois, an exile, and an anti-anti-communist. Would you begin by exploring these descriptions of yourself?

Oh, I don't know. Such categories don't really matter. These are adjectives; they are all generalizations. There may be something to them, but putting a person in a category is fundamentally inaccurate.

: How old were you when you left Hungary?

Twenty-three.

: Can you tell us something about your childhood and your first memories?

What is one's first memory is an interesting thing. Oddly, I do not have a memory that goes back before the fourth or the fifth year of my life. I came from a middle-class background. But this was such a different world that to attempt to explain it would not only be inaccurate, but also could be misleading.

Let me tell you one small thing that illustrates how different a world it was. I grew up in a society where people took it for granted that if something is advertised, it cannot be any good.

: Were your parents both devout Catholics?

They were not very devout. My mother was a convert, and my father was an agnostic. He reacted against his Catholic background. He was a very brilliant man. That is where I got my love for books. He had an absolutely beautiful private library of about two thousand books. He knew Latin and Greek.

: Was there any role for religion in your childhood?

We would go to mass occasionally. School mass was obligatory. I went through a rebellious, even agnostic period. I was a disgusting and revolting teenager. Believe me, this is no exaggeration. When I was sixteen, I began to change. I have one excuse. My parents were divorced, which was then extremely rare in Hungary. This affected me very badly. My stepfather did not mistreat me, but there was something missing in my life. What made an impression on me was that some of the most admirable people I encountered during the war were believers. As I read more and more, I began to see that the Catholic view of human nature is the only sensible one. So I must say that my attraction to Catholicism was almost as intellectual as it was spiritual.

Yerxa: Was there an aesthetic dimension to Catholicism that attracted you?

Here and there. The music in the high mass, yes. But a long mass was boring to me. (A long mass is boring to me even now!)

: What was there about Hungary when you were growing up that was so congenial to the production of such a stellar array of intellectuals?

I am a generation beyond this. The golden age of Hungarian education was about 1890 to 1920. Still, I went to a school that produced Nobel Prize-winners. One contemporary of mine just won a Nobel Prize in biochemistry a couple of years ago. We had eight years of Latin and some of Greek. Looking back today, I would say that Latin was the most useful useless thing I ever learned.

Yerxa: Did you have an attraction to history growing up?

Yes, I had an attraction to history and to literature early in my life. I was a voracious reader. I read some great Hungarian writers, who are not very well known abroad.

: How did you come to America?

Well, it is there in my *Confessions of an Original Sinner*. Hungary was not communized right after the war, but I saw that it was coming. I did some work for the British and American missions in Budapest, so it was easier for me to leave Hungary than for most people.

Yerxa: How do you see yourself now in relation to Europe and the United States?

I was about fifty years old when I suddenly found the proper formula for this: Europe is my mother; America is my wife. I come, of course, from Hungary, but it had never occurred to me that I was a European. Let me illustrate with a story that has a social element to it. In 1950, about four years after my arrival in the United States, I was invited to a dinner party. I overheard my hostess talking on the telephone to a friend: "We are having a European for dinner." For Americans, I was not a Hungarian-American or an Italian-American, but something else. And I recognized for the first time, "Gee, I am a European."

: You give the Christian doctrine of Original Sin a central place in your work and world-view. How do you react to recent developments wherein evolutionary psychology has intruded into the theological space occupied by the doctrine of Original Sin? Theorists in this field are suggesting that our sinful nature is really our "selfish nature" as evolution preferentially preserved behaviors that tended to secure the passage of one's genes into the next generation.

I am an anti-Darwinian, and one of the reasons for this is that I believe that the only evolution is the evolution of consciousness. There is an increasing intrusion of mind into matter. I have been much influenced by the work of Owen Barfield. He was a friend of C. S. Lewis, and Barfield and I became good friends. Barfield reminded me that mind precedes matter. And I believe that mind actually creates matter.

Darwinism itself was part of the evolution of consciousness. It was part of the religion of progress. It didn't take a particularly great mind to see that there is more in common between men and apes than men and minnows. To make this into an entire system of progress was actually predictable. Darwin was very much a man of his time. Yet, even if you are not a Christian, you must believe that no matter how small, there is a fundamental difference between human beings and all other living beings. If you don't believe this, then out goes all morality. Why is incest wrong? Why is cannibalism wrong?

Let me make a daring claim. Our very view of reality, of the universe, is nothing else but a part of history. Our view of the universe is nothing more and nothing less than our view of the universe. We are not just part of the universe outside of us. We have invented the universe. We are in the center of it.

This goes against the modern scientific view. When the view of the modern universe began to arise in the sixteenth century, which in a way displaced the earth from the center of the universe, man smiled at the older, geocentric view. We shouldn't be so smug. Now at the end of an age we have all sorts of absurd and ridiculous ideas: black holes and big bangs. I am not a

prophet, but I am reasonably certain that 300 or 400 years from now our descendants will not only smile but laugh at the views of the universe that were so current at the end of the twentieth century. I say this not to elevate the historians and reduce the prestige of astrophysicists. Just do not forget that we are historical beings. Everything we know about the universe is our mental creation. We are not separated from it. We cannot live but forward and think but backward. And the essential thing—and this is not arguable—is that history is bigger than science, because it is science that is part of the history of mankind.

Yerxa: In your work you have developed a distinctive notion of the "remembered past." What is the gist of that?

History is more than the recorded past. The remembered past is a larger, more complicated portion of the past. Right here in Massachusetts, I suppose if you were to ask an old Irishman what it was like in Boston in the 1920s, he would tell you a lot of things, including small details that belong to history as much as do the records in the State House. Those memories may not be as accurate, but they are not a bit less historical.

Everything that is human has its history. Memory has its history. People used to remember things differently five hundred, eight hundred years ago than they do now. Memory is more than just a neurological function. Many people, even professional historians, are inclined to believe that history is the recorded past: that history consists of records, archives, and so forth. We have to look at this in the broader sense. History is the remembered past as well as the recorded past. The past gets bigger and bigger all the time, every second. The past, as the great Protestant thinker Kierkegaard said, is the only thing we know. We live forward, but we can only think backward. The present, of course, is an illusion; the present is already come and gone. Anything about the future we know is also entirely dependent on the past. Even those people who write science fiction write their books in the past tense: because the human mind and human language are such that no narrative can be sustained at any length that is written in the present or the future tense.

Human beings have a fourth dimension, which is their history. We live in time; we are historical beings; we are different from all other living beings in the universe. Animals do not have a history; vegetables don't have a history; minerals don't have a history. We are the only living beings who know that we live, while we live. This is more than instinct; this is more than intuition. We also know that we are coming from somewhere, that we live for sixty or seventy or eighty years, then we go somewhere else. There is a religious element in that kind of knowledge. Historicity, historical being, existed ever since Adam and Eve and will continue to exist until the last human being is gone.

Yerxa: You stress participant knowledge in your understanding of historical consciousness. What do you mean by that?

Much of it I learned from Barfield. When I first began to be interested in history, I trusted historical objectivism, but while still a university student, I began to realize that objectivism doesn't always work. I encountered historians who knew a great deal, but their personal political and ideological inclinations governed their thinking and writing. I recognized that whatever a person says or does is predicated on that person's beliefs. A person will do something or say something, because that person has convinced himself that that is the better way to do it. Belief and inclination precede action and thought. Then I went through a very short period when I inclined toward subjectivism. I grew out of this very rapidly. Then I began to sense—the physicist Werner Heisenberg helped me with this—that the objective/subjective dichotomy was wrong. The subjectivist is also a determinist, because he says that a person cannot do other than what he or she does because of what he is. This went together with my recognition of the limits of individualism, in the sense that the nineteenth-century liberal idea of the autonomous individual does not exist. A person's personhood depends upon his relationship with other people. So the atomized individual is a myth. Knowledge is neither objective nor subjective, but personal.

Finally—and this was where Bar field really helped me, along with

Heisenberg earlier—I came to understand that knowledge is not really personal but participant. There is a relationship between me and the object of my interest; you cannot separate the observer from the observed. Knowledge consists of the relationship of the knower and the known.

Yerxa: Much of what you say would be congenial to historians influenced by postmodernism. How do you differ from a postmodernist epistemology?

I see the postmodernists as subjectivists. They have reached the point where they have denied scientific objectivity, but I don't think they have gone any further than that. I am a relativist only in the sense that I am absolutely convinced in the fallibility of human beings and in the limits of human knowledge. To me the past is real. For example, a postcard that your grandmother wrote from Niagara Falls in May 1924 is a real thing: the authentic expression of a real human being. Even if she used the phrase, "Wish you were here," that is also authentic because it was a period phrase.

Yerxa: How does your Christian faith influence your historical understanding?

I find the Catholic concept of human nature utterly convincing. As Pascal said, men are both beasts and angels—because of the essential inclinations of their souls. By the way, my view of human nature is the opposite not only of Karl Marx, but also of someone like Alan Greenspan, or Bill Buckley, or Adam Smith. I believe that the most important thing in the world is what people think and believe, and that the entire material organization of the world is the consequence of this.

The human mind does not follow the physical laws of the universe. Take a briefcase. The more there is in it, the more difficult it is to stuff more into it. But the more we know about something, the easier it is for us to accumulate more knowledge about it.

Our mind consists not of facts but of words. Facts do not exist apart from the words with which we express them and think of them. The words are not the packaging of the facts; the words

are the facts themselves. We think in words. There is no fact that can be separated from the statement of the fact.

History—unlike chemistry or biology or sociology—has no jargon, has no scientific language of its own. We write, teach, speak, think about history in everyday language. This has a biblical and theological basis. Language is a very mysterious gift from God. In the beginning was the Word. Not the Fact. Not the Picture. Not the Number. Not the Image. It is through words that we relate to each other. It is through words that we can give pain or pleasure to each other. And because of this—and every historian worth his salt ought to know this—the choice of the word is not only a matter of accuracy, not only an aesthetic choice, it is a moral choice. It is a moral choice how I describe some thing that has happened.

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