

The quest for historical meaning outlined

J. RÜSEN, *Zerbrechende Zeit: Über den Sinn der Geschichte*

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The meaning of history is a subject that historians tend to address at crucial intervals. It is also as if the historian as philosopher or the philosopher as historian needs to take account of the world and the discipline. In his motivation for considering the meaning of history, the eminent German philosopher of history, Jörn Rüsen, states that it is important to contemplate the experience of catastrophe that was the order of the day in the twentieth century. Much of the disciplinary certainties that prevailed have been eroded in the methodology of history because of the fashionable *cultural turn* following the experiences of shock and disbelief encountered in the past century. The work then unfolds in two distinct sections. The first deals with meaning and the larger more comprehensive second section with the metaphorical *Schritte ins Niemandsland* (Steps in no man's land). In the epilogue there is a rational evaluation by the historian as philosopher of the ludicrous assumptions of attaching special meaning to time at the turn of the millennium.

For South African readers *Zerbrechende Zeit* is of particular significance. Rüsen considers the country's past from an historical philosophical perspective. He is more than equipped for this task. His experience as historian and historiographical commentator of German history in the twentieth century interacts well with timely observations on trauma, crisis, identity, and conditions of mourning.

Rüsen is aware of the current intellectual environment in which the master narrative of the past is questioned and undermined by the intellectual *avant garde*. It is, he explains, because the ancient faith in historical development has been eroded. What makes his approach to the problem of meaning more significant is that whilst acknowledging the traditional assumptions of meaning as having a bearing on the question of subject quality and temporal considerations in the human world, there are definite and real time processes of the human world in the past. These could have a bearing on tolerance or

disturbing actions that are focused on an anticipated future. Meaning is absent at the time. It only comes about when the attributes of content are given expression (p. 9).

Quintessentially the search for meaning in the present should be sought in people reminding themselves constantly of who they are and planning their lives in meaningful directions of the every day life. However, a process is constantly subject to reinterpretation as culture directs the course of human activity. Under these circumstances, the writing of history acquires a special meaning. In fact, historical writing can even flourish as fascinating cultural representations take shape and compel us to become contemplative.

In continuation of an investigation into the narrative tradition of history that he conducted from an educational perspective, Rösen embarks on an exploration of the concept of narrating (*Erzählen*). There are numerous ways of communicating and constructing a narrative in communications between people. When the theme of consideration is the past, it is essential to take note of historicity and the rationality of historical narrative. It is in this section where Rösen makes exemplary use of Andy Mason and Dick Cloete's 1981 cartoon history of South Africa.¹ His interpretation explores the situation of telling the past in the present. The beginning is there where human relations manifest certain qualities. The middle section deals with a description of events and attempts at paving the way for comprehending a plausible future. In the transmission of the past specific symbols, images and words acquire a distinct symbolical meaning. They form part of the praxis of everyday life and are integrated as tradition between past and present. By exploring the past in this manner historical consciousness takes root as the comprehension of all mental operations in which historical meaning are contained. On the operational level it is understood as narrating understanding, analysing as empirical cultural practices dictate.

The transmission of history is however not only confined to narratives. Rösen also embarks on an exploration, largely from a personal perspective, of the visibility of history. By concentrating on the aesthetics of historical culture, he comments on the visualisation by others of representations that convey subtexts of meaning. For postmodernist cultural historians there are delightful interpretations of historical works of art, the clashes in meaning between contemporary and past symbols. From divergent symbols, it is possible to seek convergence when they are visually consolidated and accounted for in an altered

1. D. CLOETE and A. MASON, *Vusi goes back: a comic book about the history of South Africa* (Prezianian Comix, Environmental and Development Agency Trust, 1981. Reprinted 1999).

state of consciousness. The museum, Rüsen explains, then becomes a centre of remembrance where history allows for it to be seen (p. 112).

In his exploration of crisis, trauma and identity Rüsen indulges in an intellectual quest that German historians have dealt with extensively in the second part of the twentieth century – coming to terms with the Holocaust. It is here where understanding, interpretation and consolidation of historical consciousness force the historian to explore the interior of rational behaviour. In the process of working through the past the phenomenon of crisis is an ever-present reality on the historical horizon. Rüsen's classification of the normal, critical and catastrophic crisis, makes a substantial contribution towards our understanding of the manner in which history needs to critically evaluate the past in order to consolidate a meaningful understanding of the past. Identity hinges on the event. In the future events will be subject to scrutiny in order to come to an understanding of the identity of a person or a society. Events point to changes in attitude and the type of questions that are asked about previous events. This is where causality becomes a system of logic and submerges nature to present history as a means of exploring human nature.

In the preamble to exploring the German experience of the past, Rüsen indulges in the therapeutically invoked need for knowledge of trauma. Historicising trauma becomes a way of accounting for an experience that will and cannot fit into human comprehension. It is culturally proscribed and precludes external observers from comprehending the significance. If trauma is historicized it is possible to create a sense of anonymity. In the process trauma can be normalised, moralised and visualised in an aesthetic of its own. In continuation of the theme of trauma and the ruptures in sensible understanding of the past, Rüsen explores the material artefact (Auschwitz) and the spiritual fact (national socialism). These are counterbalanced and form a singular statement of the problems of a sense of contemporary German identity. The authenticity of representation and the sincerity of apology are some of the problematical dimensions. What is needed is a sense of meaning situated somewhere between myth and science. It is here where the identity is located.

The process of mourning was a theme that Rüsen explored in September 1998 at a conference of the Historical Association of South Africa at the University of Zululand. He made a number of observations, in the wake of the recent history of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. It was, he explained, necessary to mourn. Only by passing through that specific state of awareness, is it possible for a society to come to terms with its history. As historian Rüsen was aware of the German experience in the twentieth century. But he also had an understanding of South Africa's apartheid past. Unlike other

commentators who seek to find similarities in acts of evil, Rösen dwelt upon the need to be contemplative. Chapter 10 in *Zerbrechende Zeit* deals further with the theme. The reader is given a philosophical exposition of why it is necessary to bring together mourning and history. Mourning is defined as a spiritual progress of the individual in which a yearning is satisfied with constant repetitions of painful memory processes. Mourning is a human condition that has to be experienced in order to make possible the re-integration of the self in society. After mourning it is possible to once again build up relations with other people in a given environment (pp. 303-4). To argue that a later generation would see the trauma of the past differently is an oversimplification. There may be chance or incidental discoveries and that could well lead to a renewed need for mourning. Rösen considers the phenomenon of the nation and its sense of mourning. Interestingly is the fact that it is not a society that is contemplated in the process of mourning. Instead he considers humanity's sense of mourning and then contemplates the uncertainties of self-understanding in the present and the need to use different media in order to make possible substantive disclosures of the past.

Zerbrechende Zeit is a work of philosophical depth and insight. Written in an outstanding and brilliant style, by one of the leading contemporary philosophers of history, it could be a daunting reading project for the uninitiated. It is however a valuable reading experience. Overall it is a valuable study that deserves a reading audience.

Johann Tempelhoff

Potchefstroom University for CHE