

**Postmodernism, Marxism and Versions of the Future: an Interview
with Professor Martin Jay**
**Postmodernismo, marxismo y versiones del futuro: una entrevista con
el profesor Martin Jay**

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Abstact

Through his interest in postmodernism and in criticism to metanarratives, in this interview Professor Martin Jay tackles some of the main issues that have lately focused the attention of historical theory. Topics such as the turn towards historical experience, Hayden White's contribution to understanding of narratives and language, or the importance of Fredric Jameson, are brought up in this text. Professor Jay also comes back to some of his former well-known themes such as the so-called French Theory, the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno and the presence of Marxism in the United States.

Key words

Postmodernism, late capitalism, Marxism, historical experience.

Resumen

A través de su interés en el postmodernismo y crítica de las metanarrativas, en esta entrevista el profesor Martín Jay aborda algunos de los principales temas que han centrado la atención de la teoría histórica recientemente. Temas como el giro hacia la experiencia histórica, la contribución de Hayden White a la comprensión de la narrativa y el lenguaje, o la importancia de Fredric Jameson, son traídos a colación en este texto. El profesor Jay también vuelve a algunos de sus temas iniciales y conocidos como la llamada French Theory, el filósofo alemán Theodor W. Adorno y la presencia del marxismo en los Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave

Postmodernismo, capitalismo tardío, marxismo, experiencia histórica.

Postmodernism, Marxism and Versions of the Future: an Interview with Professor Martin Jay/ Postmodernism, marxismo y versiones del futuro: una entrevista con el profesor Martin Jay¹

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Professor Martin Jay is one of the most important historians alive. Although he does not need to be introduced at all, a few words will help the reader find out more about him. Professor Jay has been teaching at Berkeley for the last thirty-five years. His long and fruitful career spans four decades of cultural debates in which he has intervened with many articles and essays. His readings as well as the scope of his writing are astonishingly wide. In 1973, before reaching the age of thirty, he published *The Dialectical Imagination*, a history of the Frankfurt School, which is obligatory reading for everybody wishing to study such thinkers as Adorno or Marcuse. It has been translated into more than ten languages, including Spanish. In 1984 he published *Marxism and Totality: The adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. That same year he wrote an intellectual biography on the German philosopher Theodor Adorno, entitled *Adorno*, and also translated into several other languages. Nine years later, in 1993, he published a book on French Theory, with the title *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Finally, in 2005 Berkeley University Press published his impressive *Songs of Experience: Modern European and American Variations on a Universal Theme*, a history of the concept of experience in Western tradition. His latest book, *The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics*, explores the concept of lying in the Western history of politics.

Reading *Empire* by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt it came to my mind that the postmodern, as the cultural logic of late capitalism, is some kind of defused blend of the culture of the sixties and avant-garde modernism. I think it was truly easy for capitalism to defuse these two different challenges and give them back to us as its cultural network. A culture turned into economics under the name of post-fordism. What do you think of all that? Do you think that postmodernism still represents any challenge whatsoever to capitalism? Was it a challenge in the first place?

Postmodernism never operated at the level of systemic critique of a totality of relationships that we call broadly speaking capitalism. It always operated more at the cultural level than at the economic level. Its politics were always hard to grasp. It was

¹ Martin Jay was interviewed on December 6, 2011 at Berkeley. I take the opportunity to thank Professor Jay sincerely for his patience and willingness to answer all the questions. I also thank him for the time it took him to correct my transcription.

not clear if they were right or left. Habermas, for example, always saw it inherently as a right-wing current. He talked about it in connection with “young conservatism”, in Germany at least. In the United States it could go any direction. It always provided only a marginal critique of some aspects of the social system. As a result, postmodernism was not really absorbed because it never claimed to be truly outside and oppositional. It also had a deflationary impact on utopian and critical revolutionary pretensions. It never thought the world could be radically changed from one total system to another. It always worked within the interstices of the prevailing system to question some aspects but also to affirm others. So it always was a modest critical tool. In addition, it was always difficult to figure out what it really sought as a goal. As the prefix “post” suggests, postmodernism came after an era that it still continued in many respects, rather than leaving entirely behind. Where it was actually heading, what goals it wanted to achieve or what alternative it had were never clear. People could invest in it whatever they wanted to. So it could appear both as a promise and as a threat. Today postmodernism is no longer a flag anybody is defiantly waving. Nor is it something people are attacking either. It had its moment in the eighties and into the nineties, but after 9/11 perhaps ceased to be very significant.

Having said that, I think it did leave us some important legacies. For example, Lyotard’s critique of metanarratives, totalizing, singular narratives written from the point of view of some class or nation claiming to be at the cutting edge of history, still has a great deal of power. Today no one can be very confident about the direction the world is heading. There is no single narrative or coherent history. There is no one common direction in which the world is going. Today, no group represents the future; any group can speak for itself as an alleged avant-garde. The modernist idea of a single model of change, which everybody ultimately would follow, is very much in disrepute. Postmodernism cogently expressed that loss of faith in metanarratives.

A propos metanarratives, does history have any meaning? Or are they masks of meaning, as Herman Paul says quoting Professor White, we historians impose upon a meaningless reality?

I think history has many meanings, rather than one single meaning. I do not think we can reduce all histories to a coherent story of redemption, liberation, modernization, or whatever the master-term might be. Such fantasies always expressed the imperialistic imposition of one possible history, written from one vantage point, upon all the others. In secular form, the idea of a single history coalesced only in the eighteenth century, so it is only a couple of centuries old and was clearly Eurocentric. It did not survive the postmodern era.

Having said that, I would not endorse the alternative that everything is meaningless chaos. There is, in fact, meaning at many different levels, even if they sometimes are contradictory or in tension. We tell ourselves stories which explain how we became what we are now, where we are likely heading in the future, and what we might plausibly hope for. I’ve always liked Obama’s observation that the United States is not a perfect union, but a union that must still be perfected. In that sense, the meanings our histories provide us help to inspire whatever futures we can seek to invent or avoid. So, if we lose interest in our histories, in our past and in the past of others, we will lose contact with what might give our lives a collective orientation. Because the

past can be understood to have many different meanings, we can appreciate the options that lie before us, rather than feeling resigned to one fate; we have many different stories from which we can learn. History in this sense is a toolbox derived from past experiences which gives us options for possible futures. If we are lucky, we will avoid the imposition of one master story, one official “tale of the tribe”, written by a dominant minority claiming to speak for the whole.

Last year in Groningen I attended a conference whose main idea was that postmodernism had passed away and was now buried. Do you agree with that?

I agree that postmodernism has certainly lost its momentum as a useful concept. It did not have the capacity to engender the conviction that we were entering a genuinely new epoch. It turned out that we are now still in the middle of the modern era broadly understood; and that the post was less significant than the modern. We are still facing many of the problems modernity faced. A lot of what postmodernism said was new turned out to have already been developed in one form or another by different aesthetic modernisms. But as I said before, we have learned some things from postmodernism, such as the prudent suspicion of metanarratives, a more skeptical attitude towards the autonomous subject, and a rejection of the vain quest for firm cognitive and normative foundations. I would also add a weakening of our faith in technological solutions to our problems, even if postmodernism did often celebrate a version of the technological sublime. But by and large, I would say that postmodernism is no longer a generative research program, in the sense given that term by the philosopher of science Imre Lakatos.

I agree that postmodernism as an intellectual trend is virtually over. But as a follower of Jameson’s thesis, I still think we are living in a postmodern era, understood as the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Late capitalism is itself a problematic term. The problem with capitalism is that it turns out to be not late enough. We may now be still at the beginning of the capitalist era. It is maybe even “early capitalism”. Late capitalism is, after all, only meaningful from a Western perspective. China and India are only now really adopting this mode of production. So capitalism as a whole, for good or for ill, seems to have a long future in front of it.

Nonetheless, postmodernism may well have been a cultural expression of the unreconciled contradictions and endemic crises of a certain phase of “late” capitalism in the West. Despite many continuities with and repetitions of modernist ideas and gestures, it did have some characteristics of a cultural formation. Still, when I reviewed Jameson’s remarkable book, I remember feeling he was a bit too hasty, for example, in talking about the total domination of nature by capitalist culture. I think it is abundantly clear that nature – both in terms of the external environment and internal human psyche – still is not truly mastered by human culture, capitalist or otherwise.

I think that Jameson’s ideas about the death of Nature or the complete reification of unconscious and so on are very important in his conceptualization of

the postmodern. I find them truly insightful but also polemic. I think Jameson's pessimism sometimes is more than he can bear. Some parts of Jameson's vision are in some way a problematic adoption of the works of Max Weber and Michel Foucault.

Foucault always thought there would be resistance to that domination. He always thought there would be bodies and pleasures that would not be completely disciplined and normalized. There was always an outside to culture. He knew that culture was inadequate to the task of total control. There is, after all, no one single culture, but rather many which compete and even undermine each other, preventing a totalistic domination by just one. Although Foucault was impatient with the Freudian model of an unconscious repressed or sublimated by the ego and superego, he refused to flatten out the distinction between external norms and internal desires, reducing everything to cultural construction all the way down.

According to François Cusset, we may say French Theory is an American creation based upon what some French philosophers wrote in the sixties and seventies. You wrote an astonishing book on French Theory (*Downcast Eyes*). I think after the theory wars have gone by we may use this theory without the excesses that characterized its use twenty years ago.

I think it is not as much a construct as a dialogue in the Anglo-American world. But it was returned to France as a construction or even a betrayal of what was really going at the time in French culture. First of all, they were not homogeneous. There was not one single French Theory. They were often quarrelling between themselves in powerful ways. It is true that sometimes there was a quick and easy assimilation which meant reduction, often diminished by some critics of French Theory.

Having said that, it is also true that Anglo-American world read some of these theorists quite skillfully. They were not always reduced to caricatures. There was also a very subtle reception. Anglo-American readers and interpreters were often fair hermeneutists of these philosophers. But it is also true that the reception of ideas, especially across national and linguistic borders, is always a reception which implies misreading, it is always about creative appropriation. And the French themselves did it. What is called French Theory is often derived from the reading or misreading of Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Spinoza, Marx and Freud. French Freud has little to do with the German Freud.

Finally, there are some new studies about the origins of the ideas of French Theory which suggest that some of these ideas came from the United States in the first place. So I would say it is a process of semi-misreading, semi-interpretation, or semi-appropriation. It is not a typical process of adoption. I would avoid the idea that it is nothing but a construct. It is a dialogic interactive hybrid. French Theory is hybridization all the way down.

What remains of all that philosophical boldness here in the United States?

There is still a creative dialogue going on, if at a reduced speed and with less intensity. There are new French theorists too to learn from: Rancière, Badiou, Balibar, etc. But it is not as incandescent and heated a debate as it was back in the eighties. The theory wars are over. The arrogance expressed by some of the celebrants of French Theory is also gone. Now it is possible to be more circumspect and selective in responding to these ideas without the need to scandalize skeptics or congratulate yourself on being smarter than everybody else in the room. In general, I do not like to talk about the “death” of a movement or an idea. We often seem to talk dramatically about the alleged death of art, the death of modernism, the death of utopia or the death of whatever seems no longer in fashion. Unlike humans and other mortals, ideas often seem to expire, but then come back in unexpected ways. Take for example American pragmatism. It was declared “dead” in the fifties and sixties. Nobody read Dewey, Peirce or James. But now, thanks to philosophers like Richard Rorty, Richard Bernstein, Richard Shusterman, Hilary Putnam and even Jürgen Habermas, it once again has a powerful role in contemporary discourse.

Let’s turn to Marxism. Despite the great achievements of American scholars in bringing us new and brilliant insights into Marxism, I read few books written on Marxism. I cannot help feeling that scholars have in some way defused Marxism. What can you tell us about the American history of Marxist philosophy in our postmodern times?

Marxism in the United States was always embattled. But in the late 1960s, for a very brief period of time, Marxist theory began to be embraced in a non-dogmatic way, separated from Communism and the fanaticisms of Stalinism in particular. It was possible to be a Marxist intellectual without being a follower of the Party line, forced to defend the Soviet Union or China. For that short period, maybe ten or fifteen years, genuine intellectual talent was directed towards the development and application of Marxist theory and the absorption of ideas from Europe. In 1970, I contributed to a collection called *The Unknown Dimension*, whose title suggested the still obscure state of European leftist thought in America at that time. People did not yet really know about Gramsci, Althusser, Sartre, the Frankfurt School, Bloch or even Lukács. There was great excitement produced by encountering these ideas for the first time, expressed in books like Fredric Jameson’s *Marxism and Form*.

After these fifteen years, the excitement waned as the left declined as a political force, and poststructuralist currents emerged in its wake. Many former leftists became post or even anti-Marxist. But perhaps today with the current economic crisis which seems to have no end, Marxist critique may become relevant once again. Still, there are very few major American intellectuals who feel comfortable calling themselves outright Marxists and thinking of socialism as a real alternative to capitalism.

As you know I am writing a dissertation on Hayden White and Fredric Jameson. I would like to know your opinion about both of them. Reading Perry Anderson’s *The Origins of Postmodernity*, one may think that Jameson is the most important Marxist thinker alive. I believe so. What do you think about it? And concerning White, can we imagine the theory of history in the last four decades without him?

They are both creative and brilliant intellectuals whose works have been very influential. Hayden [White] is still an enfant terrible into his eighties. The general argument of *Metahistory*, demonstrating the importance of emplotment, tropic formalism, and post facto historical narrativization, was very influential. After his intervention, we cannot go back to a naïve version of historical writing. What was perhaps less successful was his later idea of writing history in the middle voice, which tried to overcome the distance between the present historian and the object of his or her inquiry. There was no way to implement it in serious history writing. But in general I have great respect for what White has done. He instilled in historians a consciousness of the rhetorically inflected ways we make sense of the past. There are, of course, also communal standards among historians that challenge the idea that you can simply write an historical narrative as if it were entirely imagined like a novel. There is strong resistance to collapsing historical narrative into fictional narrative. Historians are always intent on judging other historians not simply on the basis of how elegant or persuasive their stories are, but on something called evidence, which works as a check on the narratives people can plausibly tell. White has always struggled with this kind of objection among the historians.

Jameson is also an enormously productive and wide-ranging cultural critic. It is really difficult to keep up with him, so prolific are his writings. He examines literature, cinema, art, theory, politics and even architecture. Jameson has had great impact in maintaining the creative force of a Marxist analysis when Marxism, as I have said earlier, seemed exhausted. With the exception of Perry Anderson, there may be no one of his stature in the Anglo-American world who is writing in the Marxist tradition about contemporary questions.

What is an intellectual in your opinion? I ask you this question because I am not sure if there have been any intellectuals in the United States since Lionel Trilling's times. In one of his forewords to *The Ideologies of Theory*, Fredric Jameson said that American left-wing writers and specifically American Marxist writers have always longed for a public that never came into being in the first place. Why is that so?

The word "intellectual", coming into common usage during the Dreyfus Affair, had from the very beginning a dubious and even negative aura surrounding it. If someone asked me what I do for living, I would not say I am an intellectual. I would say I am an historian or a professor. Intellectual seems in some ways an arrogant self-designation. It is still a word with a lot of strong negative connotations. It also changes its meaning depending on the context in which it is used. An intellectual could be someone who is within the institutions of a particular society, a "priest", as Leszek Kolakowski once put it, who legitimates the status quo. But he or she can also be outside the conventional norms of these institutions, willing to risk being controversial, and in this sense is a "jester", to cite his opposing category. In general, intellectuals are brave enough (or foolish enough) to comment on issues outside their alleged area of expertise. They also often claim to represent the enlightened opinion of a specific group – a class, nation or ethnic group – beyond the community of intellectuals themselves. They may try to speak on behalf of the general interest of society or even of humankind,

which is a dangerous self-aggrandizing thing to do. Michel Foucault famously attacked the idea of the universal intellectual, and it is hard today to play that role.

There is a wonderful recent book by Stefan Collini, who teaches in Cambridge, which is called *Absent Minds*. In it he deals with the British attitude towards intellectuals, which is often contemptuous and yet envious of the imagined French figure of the heroic, public, universal intellectual. This kind of ambivalence can be found to a certain extent in the United States as well. The United States is a country in which most intellectual life is carried out within the walls of the academy. Virtually no intellectuals are associated with political parties. There are few if any intellectuals emerging from and becoming spokesmen of the lower classes in the sense of Antonio Gramsci's organic intellectual. Most of us have the security of academic positions or can get grants to support our work, which means that American intellectuals do not have the desperate feeling of having to distance themselves as much as possible from an intolerable status quo. The classic case of the latter is, of course, the 19th-century Russian intelligentsia, which was so marginalized and persecuted it was totally alienated from the society in which it found itself. American intellectuals are often less intransigently adversarial, even though they often will take up positions which are critical. And this may be a good thing. That is, intellectuals do not always succeed by being utter political and social outsiders, who spin utopian schemes to change the totality of relations in which they are situated. American intellectuals find themselves somewhere between comfortable mandarin insiders and relatively critical outsiders.

There is also a very segmented public sphere in the United States, which means that American intellectuals often speak only to other intellectuals and academics speak only to other academics. There is a significant distance between intellectual life and the life of everyday culture or politics. There have been intellectuals who tried to bridge the gap, tried to be more accessible and reach a larger public, but they often find that the general public thinks they speak in pretentious jargon and rejects them as elitist. There remains a strong tradition of anti-intellectualism in the United States, about which Richard Hofstadter famously wrote, a tradition very apparent, alas, in American politics. We have seen it in the spectacle of the current Republican race for the presidential nomination, where each candidate tries to show he or she is more hostile to "elitist" intellectuals, experts and even scientists.

In one of your major books, *Songs of Experience*, you wrote concerning your own synthetic style: "It would be more fruitful to remain within the tension created by the paradox".² I find an echo of Adorno here. But what would you say if I labeled your work as metahistorically liberal? It is a kind of kaleidoscope in which you do not resolve any contradiction; you do not execute any violence against a paradox.

Adorno would have been very unwilling to call himself liberal. He was resolutely Marxist and defiantly utopian. As for me, I am temperately a left liberal with a certain skepticism about radical answers and a certain naïve optimism about argument and reasoning to find solutions, which is a liberal position basically. But interestingly, the

² Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern European and American Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 2005), 6.

topics I usually choose are not liberal topics and the people I write about are rarely liberals. I found myself always more interested at some level in people who are illiberal, both on the left and the right, maybe because I am puzzled by what they believe and need to find out what the logic of their position might be. My own default position is a kind of garden-variety left liberalism, not very exciting or unusual. But I find myself more interested as a scholar in another kind of thought, a thought more provocative, dangerous, or utopian.

I think irony is the master trope that fits your work. Is this kind of approach not fascinating and paralyzing at the same time?

We all have an ironic sensibility when it comes to dealing with most histories because we are not comfortable with the idea that history is inherently comic or tragic. Irony, I would agree, may be an expression of political paralysis, because we do not have the confidence that we can answer the big questions. All we can do is argue and reason, listening with an open mind to the arguments of others, and remain within the messiness of unsatisfying alternatives and be ironic about where they may lead us. It is probably true that irony is my default position. I think my generation shares this ironic position, even after the sincere enthusiasm of the sixties, which, after all, led – ironically – to Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and George Bush.

I think Adorno's recent success in American scholars is due to the liberal and individualistic mind of American scholars (there is no covered judgment here). Adorno's dialectics have always seemed to me a desperate and defensive philosophy of an isolated man deeply encumbered by what he used to call the administered world. I think his philosophy expresses a deep defeat, as Perry Anderson wrote in *Considerations on Western Marxism*. In this sense I find in Adorno the figure of the rebel, easier to adopt by our postmodern world (and by American scholars in particular) than Ernst Bloch's utopianism. That may explain the former's success. What do you think of all that?

I think it is probably true. Certainly, when Jameson wrote his book on Adorno he recognized that Adorno was a figure for a post-Marxist moment of relative political impotency. Having said that, I would add that Adorno's success is probably due to his still being appreciated as intransigently critical. He forces us to think about paradoxes and the inadequacies of all positions, including liberal individualism. Adorno does not give us comfort or consolation. As he pointedly wrote, "The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass".

As for Bloch, he never had an extensive American audience. His brand of metaphysical utopianism seemed far-fetched to many. In addition, his political position – he defended the GDR until the building of the Wall – may have damaged his reputation. As far as I know, after his brief period of exile in the United States, which was a very unhappy experience for him, he never returned to these shores. In Europe he was relatively marginalized as well, despite defenders like Michael Löwy and Arno Munster.

Before the book on lying in politics, you published an impressive book on the history of the concept of experience the same year Frank Ankersmit published his breathtaking *Sublime Historical Experience*. Eelco Runia has been writing on presence for the last few years. And also H. U. Gumbrecht wrote a book on presence some years ago. Why all these articles and books on experience and the presence of past experience? Has experience displaced language in the field of the theory of history?

Displaced is too strong. I think that what experience gives us is another tool for posing new questions. But I think we still must ask ourselves about the narrative emplotments and rhetorical strategies we use to tell our stories. As I said earlier, after Hayden White we can never get back to a naïve version of historical writing. What experience expresses, and I think Ankersmit's book shows us this, is that there are uncanny and stubborn resistances of the past to the stories we tell. They are an excess of our intention to incorporate them smoothly into our historical narratives. But sometimes, through contact with objective residues of the past, we can get close to the radical otherness of a time that was very different from the present. What makes the past interesting, after all, is its ineffable difference from today, the past, to cite the familiar formula, as a foreign country. And that is why I think that notion of experience is exciting.

My own personal encounter with what Ankersmit is advocating occurred when I made a visit to Theresienstadt, about which I wrote a later essay [*The Manacles of Gravrilo Princip*]. It was a very moving experience, taking place some fifteen or so years ago. It began by conforming to my expectations of what a concentration camp would be like. But suddenly and without warning, I came upon a prison cell in which I saw the manacles and shackles of Gavrilo Princip, the boy who started World War I by killing the archduke Franz Ferdinand in June, 1914. He was incarcerated in this prison because he was too young to be executed by the Austro-Hungarians. He died in the spring of 1918 from tuberculosis. I actually held in my hands the manacles of the man who started World War I! That was an experience of the kind Ankersmit described, which jolted me out of the narrative I was telling myself about the Holocaust. In addition, my visit happened while the Balkans were inflamed by a new war and the Serbs were bombing the Bosnian city of Srebrenica. So there was an odd interruption of the Holocaust narrative I was telling myself by the earlier and later horrors that visiting the camp had unexpectedly introduced through the experience of touching those rusting irons.

So do you think that such an experience as the one that Professor Ankersmit puts forward is possible?

It is possible but it is not sufficient. Many historians have that kind of experience. But then they have to communicate it meaningfully and use evidence to make warranted assertions about what it means. Experiences are not explanations or even plausible narratives. If you believe that history is a public and inter-subjective enterprise, you have to use language and narrative, which moves us back to Hayden White's territory.

And is that historical experience utterly free of ideology or language?

No experience is utterly free. All experiences are embedded in a context. The notion of sublime historical experience is a bit like the idea of the “event” so prominent in recent French Theory, about which I’ve recently written (*Context and ‘the Eve’: The Challenge of French Theory to Historicism*, forthcoming in *New Literary History*). It is something that interrupts the context, but which you can only understand in connection with the context which it interrupts. So there is always something we bring to the table, for example knowledge about who Gavrilo Princip was and the consequences of his deed. We inevitably bring to the table our prejudices in the sense introduced by Gadamer, the assumptions that we have not yet problematized. But then something unexpected will unsettle those prejudices and show us that we must rethink our prior stories. But we never entirely transcend our expectations, so that experiences, however sublime and hard to represent, never come to us ex nihilo.

So, historical experience considered, has historiography finally become reconciled with the theory of history?

I do not think it is fully reconciled. Historians are a very heterogeneous group doing very different kinds of things. I do think historians in general have become a little more sophisticated about their assumptions. Whether this means that all historians know exactly what is happening in their workshop, as it were, I am not so sure. There has always been a gap between theory and practice anyway. Some historians have struggled to forge a stronger link between theory and practice, but a tension always remains. And perhaps that is a good thing. If there were a smooth passage from one to another, we might end up reinforcing what we already know. Theory should help us to ask new questions; it should not help us to come up with answers which are preordained. And practice should be allowed to challenge and even debunk theories, which are inadequate to the evidence they purport to illuminate.

Hans Kellner said in an interview with Ewa Domanska: “It is always worthwhile to ask what version of the future any vision of the past entails”.³ What vision of the future does your own work entail?

This is a hard question to answer. Most of the stories I tell are, I suppose, stories of learning. They are stories of our increased understanding of the complexities, paradoxes and contradictions of our endeavors. They are often stories of the human capacity to learn from mistakes and to move beyond them. Most of the stories I tell have that slightly hopeful implication. Maybe what is learned is the limits of what we can do, the incommensurability of ethical imperatives, or the inadequacy of simplistic visions of the world. But they express some sort of faith that with all the problems, with all the challenges and with all the mistakes that we have made, we still have the possibility to do extraordinary things. To that extent, even though I do not see any utopia on the horizon, I think that we are still capable of learning from our past. As a result, I do not have an apocalyptic view of the future, but rather harbor the typical liberal hope that we can muddle through and make incremental changes for the better. In my lifetime I have seen the end of Soviet-style communism, the Cold War, South African Apartheid, American segregation, the diminution of discrimination against women and sexual

³ Hans Kellner in Ewa Domanska, *Encounters. Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 49.

minorities – the list can be extended – and now there is a new stirring in the Occupy movements and the Arab Spring, so there is reason not to read history in a tragic or satirical – or perhaps even entirely ironical – mode.

Thank you very much for this interview, Professor Jay.

My pleasure.

Profile

Miguel Ángel Sanz Loroño is researching for his PhD in History, supervised by Professor Gonzalo Pasamar, at the Department of Modern and Contemporary History of the University of Zaragoza (Spain). He is enjoying a 4-year PhD-scholarship granted by the Spanish Ministry of Education. His topic of research revolves around postmodernism and recent trends of historical thought, in particular Hayden White and Fredric Jameson. In 2010 he developed a four-month research stay at de University of Groningen (The Netherlands) and has recently finished another one of three months at University of California, Berkeley (USA) under the supervision of Professor Martin Jay.

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