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# The Barber who read history and was overwhelmed

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# The Barber who read history and was overwhelmed

## **Abstract**

Beginning with a chance encounter in a Barber's shop whilst travelling, the author ruminates on history, and the proposition that each and everyone of us is an historian, and that in a sense we are all time travellers. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) is invoked, and the role of radical historians from below discussed before the author returns to his Barber shop encounter, and to Brecht. The title of the piece references Brecht's poem A Worker Reads History (1936).

## **Keywords**

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## 'The Barber Who Read History And Was Overwhelmed' by Rowan Cahill

Beginning with a chance encounter in a Barber's shop whilst travelling, the author ruminates on history, and the proposition that each and everyone of us is an historian, and that in a sense we are all time travellers. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) is invoked, and the role of radical historians from below discussed before the author returns to his Barber shop encounter, and to Brecht. The title of the piece references Brecht's poem *A Worker Reads History* (1936).

### THE BARBER WHO READ HISTORY AND WAS OVERWHELMED.\*

by Rowan Cahill

Early July, 2016. I'm away from home, interstate, and in wooded hill country on the outskirts of an Australian metropole. I need a haircut, grey locks well down my back, and see a Barber's sign, old-style.... check in, coffee for free, one barber, a couple of old blokes like me, head nods and smiles all round, he streaming Glastonbury from the net to his big-screen television, Adele pumping out songs in between chattering, but he doesn't like her chatter and keeps going to the controls to eliminate it, and there's three well browsed piles of fish killing and deer and pig killing and gun magazines on offer going back to 2010 on a cane table, so I flip through pages of trophy photos of proud masculinity decked out in expensive hunting togs posing with slaughtered animals and photos of bright shiny guns that cost a mint and read how animal-liberationists have taken over the RSPCA.... and wait my turn.....which arrives, he cleans the old-style chair of previous hair, and I seat myself.....he takes my styling direction, and begins to chat, and it doesn't take long for him to dominate and reveal himself as an historian after I respond to his what do you do question and say I'm a history teacher and he laments how people these days don't learn from history and I agree which is the go-ahead trigger and he's off like a cut snake.....take the anti-gun people all over the place, don't we understand that disarming people is the first step towards authoritarianism?, a well-known lesson from history, then Michael Moore gets a serve, a well-known film making fraudster who invents his facts and he is followed by George Orwell who knew a thing or two about governments and how they work, know why?, because he actually was one of them, really a government stooge, and did I know that the Jews and the Bankers actually got communism up and running?, saw a movie about it once, think it was *The Train* or something, well they put Stalin on a sealed train and sent him off to Moscow and he set about making communism, because they, the Jews and the Bankers, wanted something scary to frighten people with so they could keep control of everything.....he has the cut-throat and I listen to his one-way dialogue with Adele in the background from Glastonbury and realise that we all carry around in our heads versions of the past, real, invented, imagined, and on the basis of these we make decisions that guide our lives, even horribly twisted invented imagined histories.....

\*\*\*\*\*

We all carry histories within us. As soon as we look back on/reflect upon our own lives, for whatever reason, whenever, regardless of the import of the recollection/reflection, even the recall of something trivial in our individual past, and even if for a reason as commonplace as making a point in conversation based upon personal experience, we are thinking of ourselves, and treating ourselves, historically, and as an historical subject, as having a past to recall/think about, as having a history, and in looking back on that past we are acting in a basic way as historians, especially if in recalling/remembersing we are trying to make some sort of sense of a personal past, to construct some sort of chronology, create some



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sort of narrative. And if in the process of recalling/remembers, there are faults and errors, for example if misremembering takes place, if inaccurate chronologies are constructed, if invention takes place, these too are part of the historical process, faults and shortcomings that professional historians seek to avoid by training, collegial and peer interventions, and by disciplinary tenets and conventions.

\*\*\*\*\*

**W**hen we categorise ourselves, when we and think of ourselves as part of an entity, for example as a citizen/member of a nation state, as part of a race of people, as part of a religion, as having certain values and morals, indeed any thinking which puts us in contrast to an *other* which is not us, our difference reliant on there being *otherness* and *others* that are not *me/us*, then by implication we are regarding ourselves historically. Unless the *me/us* and the *other/otherness* appeared immediately *here and now* as if by miracle/magic, then they have pasts, and are rooted in pasts, no matter how any of these are understood, misunderstood, construed, misconstrued by the perceiver. There is an extent to which the process of classification/identification is an historical process, by implication involving judgements and comparisons of pasts and histories, regardless whether this process is conscious or unconscious, deliberate or accidental, voluntary or involuntary.

\*\*\*\*\*

**W**e are all Time Travellers, our every NOW an interface where the past, present, and future seamlessly merge, part of the past in the immediacy of happening, part of the future in the immediacy of before, and all three in the instant of NOW.

\*\*\*\*\*

**W**e are all part of history. Our individual beings and daily lives/existences constitute what will be the grist future historians will mull and turn over, even though the vast bulk of us will be individually unknown, anonymous, unacknowledged, uncredited. We are all part of history, and are all historical beings, contributing to and creating the now and future that will be the past.

\*\*\*\*\*



Brecht: "Who built the seven gates of Thebes?"

In his often cited 'history from below' poem *A Worker Reads History* (1936) Bertolt Brecht alerts the reader to the fact that behind history's traditionally top-down account of great and celebrated people, events, and achievements, are large numbers of anonymous and uncredited people – the bottom-up way of looking at the past. Beginning rhetorically with the question "Who built the seven gates of Thebes?" Brecht provides the answer, pointing to the huge labours of the artisans and workers involved in the actual physicality of the building of Thebes. The rest of the poem is a brief catalogue of similar well-known historical examples, people, events, cities, Empires, Brecht making the point that in telling history from the viewpoints of the rulers and the rich and the powerful, the immense contributions of the labouring masses are ignored. This unacknowledged contribution is not directly referred to as exploitative, however Brecht does refer to "slaves" in his reference to the sinking of mythical Atlantis, and in the cases of the achievements of Alexander the Great and Philip of Spain to the vast numbers of uncredited and anonymous people who perished militarily in the making of the historically remembered exploits of these greats. For Brecht the aim of the poem is to create a bottom-up awareness of history, not to propose any redress solution or action. Rather he ends his poem with these two lines: "So many particulars. / So many questions". Thus Brecht leaves the situation open and a future project for others.

Returning to where I started, on the outskirts of the metropole, it seems to me that my Barber is caught up in a nightmare version of this Brechtian world, part of the unacknowledged mass, but an atomised individual, overwhelmed by and fearful of the largeness of government, by the power of the state, by the duplicities and conspiracies of the rich and powerful, to the extent that even those who oppose these, like Orwell and Moore, seem to be but feathers in the wind, their actions null and void because nothing seems to change, and thus come to be regarded as part of the problem too, mere diversions/fools, maybe even part of conspiracies by those they allegedly oppose. In this situation a possible redress is to escape into cynicism, suspicion, fear and loathing and find refuge in the sanctity of atomised individuality and the protection of the gun, a naïve intellectual response akin to the desperate savagery of a cornered wild animal. There is a Brechtian poem in this: "The Barber Who Read History and was Overwhelmed".

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 The Little Red Songbook  
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Brecht's worker/history poem is an invitation for the reader to reimagine history: instead of the mainstream top-down version, with the systemic exploitations, iniquities, dissemblings and silences of the power relationship it represents, to imagine it from the bottom-up, to recognise and realise the labour and productivity and creativity of the anonymous mass, the common people, the source of the 'greatness' and 'achievement' traditionally attributed to a few at the top. With this Brechtian imaginative leap the fabric of historical narrative is rent, facilitating the development and growth of alternative narratives and possibilities. For the reality is that the uncredited anonymous mass, the common people, has never been totally docile, quiescent, co-operative, tame, unquestioning, compliant, unchallenging, and the past abounds with examples and instances of critiques, resistance, uprisings, rebellions from below, indeed a profundity of examples, successful and/or otherwise, where atomised individuals have rejected atomisation and found/built /created common purpose and unity and come together in movement and made history together.

It is in the interests of the top-down mainstream spinners of historical narratives to keep this alternative history hidden, badmouthed, obfuscated, and it is the role of the radical historian to reveal its extent, dimensions, diversity, richness, its successes and failures. In many ways the stories of the past we carry within our beings, embedded in our psyches and imaginations, no matter how accurately, how fragmentally, understood or misunderstood, help shape our understandings of the present, how we act or don't act, and how we envisage the future. If we do not understand that individuals can have agency, that people have in the past shrugged off atomisation and come together in movement, then chances are we will not recognise our own agency in the present, and will possibly see the future, like my barber, cynically, alone, and without hope.

Simply, history does not need to overwhelm, and as Brecht concluded, once the imaginative leap is taken, what was top-down certainty is replaced with the uncertainties and challenges of many questions, and everything, including the future, is open and not set in stone.

\*This piece has benefitted from discussion with Terry Irving.

*Rowan Cahill*

*July 2016*



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