Towards a Political Economy of Historical Truthfulness

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The Crisis of History

At the start of the twenty-first century, we face what might be called a "crisis of history". On the one hand, our age is one of immediacy and constant change. New knowledge has economic value, while old knowledge sinks unvalued into the depths of the "public domain". Education increasingly stresses the relevance of contemporary topics and practical skills - assets which students (it is believed) will be able to convert into instant earning power. In this context, it is not surprising that history is in decline in the curricula of many countries.

But, oddly enough, the past refuses to go away. Indeed, its spectre seems more than ever to intrude on public life, as questions of commemoration, historical responsibility and history education become focuses of impassioned national and international controversies. Australian historian Henry Reynolds poses the rhetorical question, "was there ever a time in the past when history was so central to the political debate, when Clio was consulted so readily?" Reynolds is referring particularly to Australia, where political leaders have increasingly mobilized history to support contending visions of national identity, and where the question of responsibility for injustices inflicted on the Aboriginal community remains an unresolved and sensitive political issue. In recent years, however, similar debates have been played out around the world. US Secretary of State Colin Powell's return to Vietnam, where he once served as a military officer, revived debate over US responsibility for events like the My Lai massacre. The Polish government's expressions of regret for Polish participation in wartime massacres of Jews

evoked criticism both from those who wanted a fuller expression of moral responsibility and from those who believe that contemporary Polish society has nothing to feel regretful for. Issues of "truth and reconciliation" dominate political debate in many countries.

The issue is not simply one of apologies for past wrongs. The past is also becoming a political issue in other ways. In Southeast Asia, the start of the twenty-first century has seen a boom in the popularity of movies depicting formative moments in national history – particularly those moments that involve conflicts with neighbouring countries. Thai historian Charnwit Kasetsiri points to the curious dichotomy between (on the one hand) the lack of interest in history within the formal curriculum and (on the other) mass public enthusiasm for these popular representations of historical consciousness. More disturbingly, in 2001, resurgent controversy over the teaching of history in Japan – fuelled by the government's approval of a text authored by the nationalist Japan Society for History Textbook Reform (Atarashii Rekishi Kyôkasho o Tsukuru Kai) – created a major international incident which threatened to reverse years of gradual improvement in Japan's relations with its neighbours, particularly South Korea and China.

Concern about such "memory wars", above all about the textbook issue in Japan, has been a major impetus for my interest in problems of historiography. However, my aim here is not to enter into the details of the textbook debate itself. Instead, I want here to consider the "crisis of history" – of which, I would argue, these controversies are symptoms – from a slightly different angle. The underlying problems, I would suggest, go beyond the questions of whether specific governments should apologize for specific past injustices. They also go beyond the problem of how to write better history textbooks, and how to prevent schoolchildren from having misleading and one-sided texts imposed upon them. Both the question of apologies and the problem of textbooks are immensely important issues for historians and others, but they are also part of a wider dilemma. Today, after all, our visions of history are drawn not just, nor even mainly, from school textbooks, but from many sources: from photographs and historical novels, from newsreel footage, film, TV and video, comic books and (increasingly) from

computerized media like the Internet. Our contemporary dilemma, then, might be phrased like this: in an age of multiple media and global flows of knowledge, how do we transmit knowledge of the past from one generation to the next?

Dissolving Events

The profound impact of new media on the transmission of historical knowledge has been highlighted particularly by the writings to two scholars, Hayden White and Pierre Nora. White points out that the rise of modern historiography was deeply connected to the authority and logic of the written narrative. But today, more than ever, knowledge of the past is conveyed through media which do not follow conventional narrative forms: through film, TV "docu-dramas", CD-rom, comic-books, Internet web pages and so on. Citing the example of Oliver Stone's film JFK, White argues that such media often intercut the "real" and the "imaginary" (documentary footage and dramatization, for example), so that the distinction between fact and fiction dissolves. (White 1996: 19) The style of a film like JFK also breaks up the narrative form in other ways: through repeated cross-cutting, frequent and deliberately disorienting flashbacks and flash-forwards, and the use of blurred or disturbingly close-up shots. As a result it becomes more and more difficult to conceive the historical "event" as a coherent story.

At the same time the events of recent history themselves, events like the Holocaust or the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, have acquired an immensity – an indescribable quality – which threatens to overwhelm the possibilities of narrative history. White therefore concludes that "not only are modern post-industrial 'accidents' more incomprehensible than anything earlier generations could possibly have imagined (think of Chernobyl), the photo and video documentation of such accidents is so full that it is difficult to work up the documentation of any one of them as elements of a single 'objective' story". (White 1996: 23) The only solution, White suggests, may lie in abandoning the narrative and adopting varying forms of "anti-narrative non-story" as a way of representing key events of the recent past.

This view resonates with wider debates about the disappearance of the historical fact. Many writers propose that, in a postmodern age, the distinction between fact and fiction has lost its hold: "according to the postmodernist view, the accuracy or inaccuracy of history is a problem only for the naïve. One can know only the 'truth' that one's language equips one to know: language speaks to us, rather than the other way around. Thus an independent, objectively verifiable historical reality does not exist independently of the language with which one speaks it, and even myth remains problematic". (Cowart 1989: 28) To some critics of postmodernism, such statements seem to have opened up a nightmare world where `anything goes`. It is therefore sometimes argued that, by blurring the boundaries between truth and untruth, postmodernism has made it easier for the ideologues of Holocaust denial and other forms of revisionism to popularize the "historiography of oblivion". (Hobsbawm 1997; Himmelfarb 1992; Ôgoshi 2000)

Identification and Interpretation

Pierre Nora, meanwhile, has interpreted changes in the way we communicate knowledge of the past in terms of a changing relationship between commemoration and history. The last few decades, according to Nora, have witnessed an explosive multiplication in the number of commemorations, memorials and heritage sites, a "commemorative bulimia" that has "all but consumed all efforts to control it." (Nora 1998: 609)

Nora relates this explosion to a shift in attitudes to the past "from the historical to the remembered and from the remembered to the commemorative". (Nora 1998: 626) History as an interpretative "science of the past" comes to be replaced by a quest to re-establish personal connection with a vanishing heritage: "a search for the one thread in the social fabric of the present that will permit direct contact with the irrevocably dead past". (Nora 1998: 626; see also Le Goff 1988: 190).

Nora's analysis highlights an important tension between two approaches to the meaning of history: approaches that might be termed

"history as interpretation" and "history as identification". From one perspective, the study of history is a search for knowledge which will enable us to understand the causal relationships between events, the genealogy of ideas and institutions and the forces which produce change in human societies. But on the other history is also a matter of identity. Our relationship with the past is not simply forged through factual knowledge or intellectual understanding of cause and effect. It also involves imagination and sympathy. Museums, memorials and heritage sites (even more than written historical texts) invite us to enter into an empathetic relationship with the people of the past: to imagine their experiences and feelings, mourn their suffering and deaths and celebrate their triumphs. Often, this identification with others in the past in turn becomes the basis for rethinking or reaffirming our own identity in the present. By remembering a particular piece of the past, by making it our own, we create our sense of belonging to a certain group of people – whether a nation, local society, ethnic minority or religious group. In this way we also define our place in a complicated and changing world. Indeed, it is the very act of historical commemoration that calls group identity into being. As Jos Perry puts it, "we recollect, therefore we are." (Perry 1999)

In the last decades of the twentieth century, memory and commemoration became particularly important weapons in the identity struggles of sub-national or diasporic social groups precisely because their stories had generally been excised from national history, or (if they were included) had been told in the words of others. Using the resources of family and individual memories, oral histories, and unwritten traditions and ceremonies, many of these groups were effectively able to challenge the grand narratives of national history.

But a yearning for the patrimonial threads that bind us to the past is not, of course, confined to oppressed minorities. One reaction to the challenges of globalization and to the "memory politics" of late twentieth century has been an upsurge of demands, from members of those "majorities" who sensed a threat to their relatively privileged position in the nation, for a re-assertion of commemorative history at a national level. As Nora observes, in the French context this was reflected in new struggles over

the constitution of a “national memory”. (Nora 1998: 635)

In Japan, too, resurgence of interest in a “patrimonial” approach to the national past can be seen, for instance, in the controversial writings of historian Sakamoto Takao. Sakamoto counterposes national historical research [rekishi kenkyû] against what he calls the raireki, an almost untranslatable word embodying notions both of history and of the personal life-course. “Historical research”, Sakamoto argues, takes an exterior and supposedly objective view of the past which searches for the “causes” of events. Raireki, by contrast, looks at the past from within the experiences of those who lived it, and therefore focuses not on historical causes but on “reasons”. (Sakamoto 1994, Sakamoto 1995) In the context of globalization and increasing domestic social malaise, Sakamoto argues the need to nurture the creation of a positive national identity by constructing a continuous raireki: a narrative linking the prewar and postwar experiences of the Japanese people and based on the symbolic power of the emperor. (for a discussion, see Narita 2001)

As these debates suggest, collective memory is a two-edged sword. The sharing of histories is a key element in the creation of personal identity, and, particularly for members of subaltern minorities, can be profoundly liberating experience. Reflections on shared pasts can also become an important starting-point for the journey towards acceptance of historical responsibility. Yet in other contexts, collective memory may be narrow and limiting, and may promote unreflective celebration of national or ethnic histories.

The Lessons of Kosovo Polje

The resurgence of “memory wars” around the world has profound and very tangible implications for the lives of many people. One rather extreme but vivid example of the power of popular representation of the past was provided by the case of the former Yugoslavia. On June 28 1989, Yugoslavs commemorated the sixth-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosova Polje, the conflict in which the Serbian forces of Prince Lazar were defeated by the

Ottoman Empire. The ceremony marking the anniversary was attended by the entire leadership of the (then) Yugoslav federation, but – in a carefully scripted media event – the central role was played by Serbian communist leader Slobodan Milošević. As one account describes it "the commemoration had all the trappings of a coronation staged as a Hollywood extravaganza. Milošević descended by helicopter from the heavens into the cheering crowd; the masses were the extras. The cameras focused on his arrival. In some vague way, the commentator placed Slobodan Milošević at the center of the Serbian ancestral myth of Prince Lazar, the hero of the Kosova battle". (Milošević 1995, 107) The anniversary celebrations marked "the crowning of Milošević as the strongman of Serbia", and launched the irrevocable slide of the former Yugoslavia into war and genocide. (Čuruvija and Torov 1995, 85)

The 1389 Battle of Kosova Polje was not the only historical event to be seized on by the media during the break up of Yugoslavia. Franjo Tudjman, who became president of Croatia in 1990, had previously been a professor of history known for his controversial views on World War II (during which the Croatian regime of Ante Pavelić had collaborated with Nazi Germany). Tudjman did not deny the horrors of the holocaust, but he sought to relativise them by emphasizing the "the timeless universality of genocidal acts". (Tudjman 1996, 121) His particular contribution to the historiography of oblivion was an account of the Second World War which claimed that the number of deaths in the Jasenovac concentration camp in Croatia, where many Serbs and Yugoslav Jews had died, were greatly exaggerated. (Tudjman 1996; Tanner 1997, 152-153 and 205) As Tudjman's political influence grew, Serbian television responded by presenting programs which argued, on the contrary, that official history had concealed the extent of wartime massacres of Serbs by Croats. Television cameras recorded the opening up of mass graves of the victims of World War II massacres, and the reburial of their remains. Reminders of the gruesome killings of Serbs at Jasenovac and elsewhere rekindled old hatreds and intensified Serb fears of resurgent Croat nationalism. Meanwhile, Croatian television also began demonizing the wartime behaviour of the Serbs and presenting the Croats as the true victims – victims of Communist propaganda. (Milošević 1995, 109-110; Tanner 1997, 233)

I cite these examples from the Yugoslav tragedy because they dramatically illustrate several points. One is the fact that, in a multi-media age, people's knowledge of the past is framed, not just by formal history education but also by representations of history in a wide range of other media. These media of historical representation often have great power to evoke a sense of identification between past and present, but in so doing they may also offer potent implicit interpretations of the relationship between history and contemporary society. The televised spectacle of Slobodan Milošević descending by helicopter onto the spot where Prince Lazar was slain in battle, for example, not only cast Milošević in the role of heir to the hero of Serb history, but also (in the minds of many viewers) linked 14th century Christian Serb resistance to the Muslim Ottoman empire with the contemporary conflict between Christian Serbs and Muslim Kosovar Albanians. Revived memories of wartime atrocities evoked mistrust of neighbouring communities, and encouraged people to respond more violently than they might otherwise have done to emerging political tensions, for fear of the violence which they anticipated from their old enemies. In the case of Serbia and Croatia, the power of television to disseminate two radically different versions of history was particularly great because television in both places was heavily influenced by the state, and worsening economic conditions made it difficult for people to afford other sources of information. The situation provoked Serb student protestors in 1992 to coin the slogan "Turn off your TV and open your eyes!" (Milošević 1995, 121).

Even in situations where the media are less open to obvious manipulation, however, their impact on understandings of the past, for better or worse, is both subtle and profound. The impact of Kobayashi Yoshinori's comics on the historical imagination of Japanese manga fans is a case in point. Since the underlying political and social circumstances are very different, the "memory wars" provoked by Kobayashi and other neo-nationalists in Japan, are most unlikely to produce disastrous consequences of the sort witnessed in the Balkans, but their direct impact on the politics of the present was amply illustrated by last year's textbook affair.

"Turn on Your TV, but Open Your Eyes"

How then should historians respond to the contemporary "crisis of history"? Here, I want to suggest four tentative answers to this question.

1. t makes no sense for historians to reject or ignore new media of historical representation, or to insist on a return to the absolute authority of the narrative text. Instead, we need to find ways to use new media creatively and critically, and to use multiple media in conjunction with one another to convey a knowledge of history. In particular, it seems vital to encourage students to understand the nature, possibilities and limitations of the various media through which they learn about the past. In this sense, the message might be rephrased as "Turn on your TV (and your video, and your computer), but open your eyes."

2. t is important also for historians to recognize the power of commemoration, or "history as identification". The academic historian (indeed, the whole enlightenment scholarly tradition) tends to be wary of emotions. Debate about historical knowledge often treats "knowledge" as though it were a form of pure reason existing beyond the sullying realms of passion, fear, hope or sheer enjoyment. Part of the power of some of the more alarming forms of popular nationalist historiography, as well as of many popular media representations of the past, comes from their capacity to touch the emotions which scholarly history often represses. In thinking about presentations of the past in popular media, it seems important to acknowledge the inseparable connection between knowledge, feeling and action. Our understanding of the past is not just an intellectual system. It is also something from which we derive personal identity, and which therefore helps to determine how we act in the world. Acknowledging that our relationship with the past is a matter of feeling and action, as well as of factual knowledge, does not mean that we can accept versions of history simply because they "make us feel good". On the contrary, it is a necessary starting point for reflecting critically on the way that history embeds itself in our lives, and the way that we bring the baggage of our

own life experience to every encounter with the past.

3. ince our understandings of the past involve feeling, identity and action as well as knowledge and reasoning, the "truthfulness" of history really matters. We cannot just accept a "pop-postmodern" version of history that treats all historical narratives as equally "invented". What various forms of "postmodern" thought have done is to make us more sensitive than before to the complexities of representing the past in words or images. They remind us that the very words used to speak about the past ("civilization", "progress", "century", "society", "memory") carry their own burden of history. "Postmodern" writings illuminate the fact that the lines we draw around particular pasts – the spatial lines around national histories and the temporal lines around eras like "the middle ages" or "modernity" – are mental constructions, and that the texture of the past looks very different when the lines are redrawn. And they remind us that the same events can generate many different narratives, each with its own internal "regime of truth".

All this should challenge us to deeper thought about the relationship between representation and truth, rather than (as sometimes seems to happen) evoking a detached and casual cynicism about the possibility of truthfulness. Such cynicism, I think, is only possible when we forget the fact that thought, feeling and action are irrevocably interconnected. Our knowledge of the past is of course made up of representations (which include "narratives" in the conventional sense of the word, as well as non-narrative images such as photographs). But it is not just representation. It is knowledge which shapes feelings and actions, and which is itself shaped by the experience of acting in the world.

My grandfather may tell me a story about the past, according to which the people in the village down the road were responsible for mass murder. The people in the village down the road may believe another story about the past, according to which it was actually my grandfather and his neighbours who were responsible. These are just two different narratives. Either or both can be recorded as oral traditions, treated as texts for doctoral research, incorporated into school

textbooks or comic books. Historians may reasonably insist that neither story tells the whole truth of what really happened, and that it is no longer possible to reconstruct the truth with perfect accuracy. But if they stop at that point – if they conclude that it does not matter which story I hear and believe, that only the social location of the narrator, the strength of narrator's convictions or the internal coherence of the narrative matters – then I think they misconstrue the nature of historical knowledge.

For when I walk down the road with a machine gun in my hands to exact revenge on the people of the next village, because I have heard my grandfather's story of the past but not theirs, I step across the limits of notion that history is merely narrative. I step across the same limits if, without wielding a gun, I neither care nor act when disaster overtakes the people of the next village, because I have heard only my grandfather's story, and believe that they are mass murders who deserve no sympathy.

4. In this sense, there is a need to find a way of addressing questions of truth without reverting to a crude empiricism in which history is seen as a set of universally acceptable, scientifically verifiable facts.

In Relation to the Past

On the basis of these four tentative conclusions, I shall try to explore a notion of "historical truthfulness". What this means, roughly, is as follows. The expression "historical truth" tends to suggest the existence "out there" in the real world of a total reality which is accessible to and describable by the historian. This is illusory, not because there is no historical reality but because historical reality is inexhaustible. The substance of reality is so complex and so seamlessly interconnected that parts of it will always escape the nets of meaning constructed by language.

"Historical truthfulness", on the other hand, refers to the way we conduct our relationship with the past. It begins with attentiveness to the presence of the past: the recognition that we ourselves are shaped by the past,

and that knowing the past is therefore essential to knowing ourselves and others, and indeed to knowing what it is to be human. Whatever else it may impart, history education which does not stimulate this attentiveness serves very little useful purpose.

Attentiveness to diverse representations of the past is important for many reasons. At the most obvious level, it helps to prevent unquestioning acceptance of slanted propaganda about the past. It would have been better for people in the former Yugoslavia to have had a chance to hear and assess both nationalist Serbian and nationalist Croatian versions of the events of the Second World War, rather than (as many were) simply being exposed to one or the other. It would have been better still had they had more ready access, not just to two counterposed nationalist narratives of the past, but to the multiple alternative narratives put forward (often at considerable personal risk) by dissenters, minorities and fringe media on both sides of the ethnic divide, as well as by those who viewed the Serbian and Croatian past from outside the frontiers of the former Yugoslavia.

To understand and compare different representations of the past, it is essential, not just to ask, “who is telling this story?” but also to ask, “how?” A key theme of my current research is the way that differing media of historical expression influence the way that the past is represented. Media possess their own codes of representation, their own possibilities and limitations. Some (historical movies like Schindler’s List or Dances with Wolves, for example) readily evoke emotion and identification, while others (like many academic texts) encourage abstract explanation; some tend to present the life of past ages as an interwoven texture, while others encourage us to separate the threads for analytical purposes. In a multimedia age, the same event is often represented in many forms, and representations in one medium resonate with representations in another. The impulses to compare multiple representations, to understand the relationship between medium and message, and use varied media creatively to find out about the past are crucial aspects of historical truthfulness.

Attending to diverse representations of a past event does not give us

a perfect picture of “the truth” of what happened. Nor can it be a purely relativist process, where all accounts are treated with equal skepticism. Our knowledge of the past determines who we are and how we live in the present. It is therefore inevitable that some representations will influence us more than others. Living at the beginning of the twenty-first century, I cannot fully enter into the mental world of a nineteenth century English factory worker, a 1930s Japanese farmer, or the precolonial Aboriginal families whose territory once encompassed the piece of land that is now my back garden. It is unlikely, too, that I can fully enter into the mental world of some contemporary Aboriginal communities, such as those whose accounts of the past (drawing on quite different “regimes of truth” from those which dominate Australian academic history writing) are documented by Deborah Bird Rose and Hokari Minoru. (Rose 1991; Hokari 2001) This should not prevent me from exercising my imagination to the full in the effort to understand their experience and vision of the world. But in the end historical truthfulness also demands acknowledgement of the fissures and silences that run through all knowledge.

While recognizing its own limits, though, historical truthfulness above all involves an effort to make sense of the past. Listening to the multiple voices of history must also be a process through which we try to gain a broader picture of past events, judge the reliability of conflicting stories, assess the meanings of different forms of testimonies and evidence, and search for patterns that explain the relationship between past and present. In a complex information age, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by a mass of contradictory narratives. But the temptation to abdicate opinion – to leave the conclusions to “the experts” – is dangerous because it creates a vacuum which can all too readily be filled by the latest or most appealingly-presented ideology. In relation to historical understanding, as in relation to politics, amorphous apathy and a frenzied enthusiasm for media-manipulated public performance are inverse sides of the same coin.

Historical truthfulness, then, is an ongoing conversation through which, by engaging with the views of others in different social and spatial locations (across and within national boundaries) we shape and reshape our understanding of the past. It is therefore also a process of self-reflection. As

we enter into a dialogue with varied representations of the past, we do not only create our own interpretations and our sense of identity by accepting some representations and rejecting others. We are also forced to think about our position in the present, and how it influences our interpretations and choices. My reactions to a particular novel or photograph or film – whether it moves me, how I relate it to the wider stories I tell about the past, whether and how it influences the way I live my life – depends on many factors: amongst other things on my background knowledge about the past, on my current social position and views of the world, and on the way in which I have experienced historical events.

I grew up in England in the 1950s and 1960s, learning school history in a framework which, at least in the early years, was intensely nationalistic and often imperialist. But in conducting historical research I have found myself looking back at the wide range of other stories and images and the influenced my sense of the past. These included highly jingoistic films about the Second World War, which characteristically presented the War as a conflict in which good (=Britain) confronted evil (=Gemany), and good triumphed, as well as imperialist comic books in which heroic British explorers and missionaries brought the blessings of "civilization" to suitably grateful "natives". But they also included more complicated accounts of the past. As a teenager I was deeply impressed by R. C. Hutchinson's now long-forgotten novel Joanna at Daybreak, which deals with the issue of the Holocaust from the perspective of a German women struggling to come to terms with her sense of responsibility in the chaos of the immediate postwar years. Re-reading this in middle age, I find its power as a novel marred by excessive moral and religious overtones, but it still suggests the potential of the novel to extend the historical imagination into unfamiliar landscapes which offer a new vantage-point on the past. Going to school in the Netherlands for two years I also discovered that the events of the Western European past looked surprisingly different in Dutch textbooks and museums from the way they looked in British textbooks and museums. This gave me a clearer understanding of the stories my mother had told me of her own childhood experiences, moving between schools in England where she was taught about the glorious reign of "Good Queen Bess" [Queen Elizabeth I] and schools in the newly independent Ireland,

where she was taught about the misery inflicted on the Irish people by “Bad Queen Bess”.

As an adult I have spent most of my time studying and researching Japanese history, and in the process defining and redefining my own relationship to that history. Studying key events of the recent Japanese past, including the experiences of prewar imperial expansion and war, have made me look in new ways at the past of Britain, where I grew up, and of Australia, where I now live. I cannot, for example, reflect on problems of war responsibility in Japan without also reflecting on problems of British responsibility for colonialism in Australia and elsewhere. At the same time, I have found myself increasingly involved in intense and ongoing debates about the teaching of history in Japan. As time has gone on, I have been forced to reflect on a notion that once seemed straightforward: the notion of “my history”. The idea that some parts of the past are “ours”, and some are not, no longer seems so simple. The historical events that took place in particular geographical spaces (like Britain and Ireland) may be parts of “my past” because they have in some way helped to shape who I am, but the historical events that took place in others (like Australia and Japan) have also in a sense become parts of “my past” because my life is caught up in their future.

It is absurd and illusory to imagine that we can view the past from any vantage point but the present, or to pretend that we can project ourselves back into the minds and bodies of participants in past events. All we can do is endeavour to be honest about our position in the present, and about the way our vision of the past relates to our vision for the future. If we recognize that we view the past from the present, acknowledge the limits of that viewpoint, and compare our vantage points with those of other contemporaries, learning about the past can, I think and hope, become part of an ongoing effort to create for ourselves a meaningful position in the present.

Lastly, historical truthfulness is not just a psychological relationship between an individual and the past. It is also a social matter. In the twenty-first century, our knowledge of the past is deeply influenced by the unequal power and reach of various media, and by the unequal access of different groups of

people to those media. Political and economic power translates into the capacity to shape the landscapes of the historical imagination. The economics of publishing and the communicational codes of the comic book have had a decisive impact on Japanese people's access to knowledge of key events of the recent Japanese past. The global reach of Hollywood allows certain images of the past to be exported around the world, moulding many people's unconscious sense of the structure and meaning of world history.

Historical truthfulness, then, requires a shared effort to widen access to knowledge of the past, both by using the potential of existing media to the full and (at times) by attacking the systems of privilege that generate unequal exchanges of knowledge. The emergence of new media like the Internet can open up new ways to overcome existing monopolies of knowledge. But at the same time, the legally enforced private ownership of knowledge is increasingly used to prevent critical examination of certain versions of history. History teaching and research comes under growing pressure from the worldwide tendency towards the privatization of higher education. Yet those of us who engage in the creation of historical knowledge have perhaps greater opportunities than ever before to combine the use of varied media and to explore new ways of communicating that knowledge beyond the narrow confines of the lecture theatre.

In this sense, we need to work not just towards a discourse of historical truthfulness but also towards a political economy of historical truthfulness – a society which creates space for critical understanding and open exchange of multiple interpretations of the past, understanding and exchange which extends across national boundaries. Without this we risk one of the most pernicious forms of impoverishment: the self-inflicted poverty that human beings, for fear of one another, create within their own minds.

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