

## Interview: John Lukacs

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*In September, 1967, I first walked into the history classroom of John Lukacs, the prominent historian, public intellectual, and soon-to-be Chair of the History Department at Chestnut Hill College. On July 19 of this year, I shared a unique moment with Lukacs as I sat down, both as former student and now professional colleague, in Lukacs's historic home and discussed his perspectives on the generations he has taught, especially the sixties, as well on his thoughts on the teaching and writing of history, and what Lukacs sees as the current appetite for history.*

*When I entered his voluminous library, I had prepared a four-page protocol of the questions I intended to discuss with Lukacs. Within fifteen minutes of our conversation, I had the same feeling that I had so many years ago when I sat in his classroom. That was, no matter what I had studiously outlined, Lukacs would take my prompts in new directions. Lukacs is living history, his reflections and fine-edge, pithy insights stir me still.*

*Even though Lukacs has written over thirty books, no one has been able to neatly tuck him into any defined category. Almost a modern prophet, Lukacs was one of the first to publically condemn the views of Joseph of McCarthy, was quick to observe that the U. S. S. R. was a feeble power and would eventually fall, and most recently, stated early on his opposition to the War in Iraq. A European dissident who immigrated to this country from Hungary, Lukacs has taught and written about history for most of his long and full life. This past July, Lukacs was in the New York Times Book Review for the recent publication of his exchange of letters with George Kennan.<sup>1</sup> To me, however, Lukacs is personal – both forty years ago and today, he is a real presence.*

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*Dr. Lukacs, this is quite a special moment for me as it has been over 40 years since I first sat in your history classroom at Chestnut Hill. As we begin this interview, I would first like to ask you to reflect on your distinguished years as a college professor and the students to whom you taught history.*

**Lukacs:** When I talked about this with other professors I know in all kinds of institutions, institutions very different from Chestnut hill, and they all had the same experience

*Really?*

**Lukacs:** The best students were approximately from the late '50s to about '77.

*When I started at Chestnut Hill in '67, we had to wear skirts to classes; I always sat in the front row of your classes, where we took copious notes, listening to every word you said, revering your words – truly – where we were not allowed to cut classes, where the idea of what our career was, was not our first consideration.*

**Lukacs:** Well, that's the way it should be. And that's the way it was for a long time.

*Where did it go? When I left Chestnut Hill in '71, we were wearing jeans and t-shirts, we could cut, our voice mattered as much as yours, we thought – mistakenly...*

**Lukacs:** I don't know if you're interested in this, but Chestnut Hill, as all Catholic girls' colleges, in other words, all girls' colleges, had a great crisis beginning in '68. You see, Chestnut Hill, I would say, with all respect to Rosemont and Immaculata, was intellectually surely the best of the Catholic girls' colleges. A lot of this was due to the nuns, and also Chestnut Hill had two extraordinary good presidents, wise presidents. Sister Katherine Pence retired and died in '68 and in '68, the college was hit by a number of blows, some of them were particular for Chestnut Hill, some of them were general. The general blow was, that affected all girls' colleges, was that the men's colleges were taking girls. So the first time since the college was founded, the college had an enrollment problem. The college had never had an enrollment problem. You see, Chestnut Hill could be, not very, but fairly selective. Let's go inside it, with a broader development, sociological, that involved not only Chestnut Hill, but a lot of the Catholic girls' colleges. You see, I don't know about your family and you probably don't fit in here, but a vast majority of girls who came to Chestnut Hill were first-generation college [students]; in other words, they were very lucky and very pleased that their parents could send them to college. This also coincided with the idea of getting a general education. You see, by '68, their parents had been college graduates, so together with what's going on in the '60s, you see the wave of '60s rebelliousness hit Chestnut Hill about five years later. This was a general development. Young girls by that time were not willing and did not have to follow where their parents were going to send them. This was a big problem from which the college only partially recovered.

In addition to this was something that, even before Vatican II – beginning about 1960, and there are statistics about this which I haven't studied – there was a precipitous drop in the number of Catholic girls who wanted to have a religious career. You see, both novices and male seminarians – the drop was seventy, eighty percent, and you see [what had been] the strength of the College of Chestnut Hill. This was also a financial asset, that there were intelligent nuns who could run the college. When I came to Chestnut Hill, I was impressed by the general intellectual acumen of some of the nuns, who were administrators of the college, and since they were nuns, this didn't cost the college anything.

*Don't you think that's been compounded through the decades across all Catholic education institutions?*

**Lukacs:** But in Chestnut Hill it was particularly bad because the next president, whom I got along with very well, Mary Xavier, she was pretty good, but she was not the same caliber [as her predecessor]. The college had to totter on, and there were some people, especially '71, '72, when enrollment dropped and dropped, some people, colleagues of mine, who thought the college was over, was going to fold. I did not think so, and it was one of the few things where I've been right, because I said, "This is true, but on the other hand, we live in a society where now, everyone has to go to college." But there was a certain homogeneity of Catholic middle class, not all of them, [but] a great majority of the students in the '40s, '50s, '60s, and now [in the] '70s it was gone.

*How did that affect you as a teacher, professor in the classroom?*

**Lukacs:** My last memorable class was the class of '74. After '74, I had occasionally good students, but only occasionally. You see, my situation, my very career, my way of life, my aim of life, is unorthodox, not typical. I wanted to make my career by writing, so I was never much interested in the academic step-ladder. To go to other institutions...

*We always wondered what kept you.*

**Lukacs:** I had a chance, but I did not have a very big chance, because then the other institutions, other people, want to know that this person is interested. Now, the other element was that I lost my native country and my family when I came to this country, and I didn't want to move. In '71, '72, out of the blue, I was offered a big job. Usually, you must understand, it's like marriage, like sex, it takes two of them. Usually you're offered something when people know you're available. I was never available, but I still had a big offer to teach, from Tufts University in Boston, where I would teach half of what I taught at Chestnut Hill, instead of twelve hours a week, six hours a week, with more than double the salary. I did not give it a thought, you know? Or rather, there was only so much that I did not exactly tell them that, "I don't want to stay," but they offered me such a fair amount of money, and this was after my wife had died. So I commuted for two days every week to Boston, simply because in those days it was a lot of money, \$30,000 and all of my expenses. But from the first moment, I had no intention of going there. Then I wrote and wrote, and made my career writing, and then, in the middle '80s, came another change.

The change was that publishers were interested in me, well, more than they are now, and I was earning some money through my writing. You know they pay you in advance on royalties, because if you work on royalties and somebody works on a book for three years, he doesn't get money until the fourth year. The advance of royalties is against royalties earned, and it's not repayable. It only happens to maybe two, maybe three books of mine, where I earned past the

advance. By the '80s for writers, everything was advance. I was surprisingly getting – I never got big advances – but enough advances, so I made a deal with the then president of the college that, “Alright, I will teach full time the first semester, but for half of my salary,” and then I could travel and write from Christmas to Labor Day. This is what I did from '86 to the '90s and it worked out well. My pension and Social Security were not and are not enough to cover my expenses, but I easily earned the rest through my writing... but not any longer. The industry is in very bad shape. But it lasted a long time.

After leaving Chestnut Hill College in 1997, I taught a little for three or four more years at Penn, but there because I wanted to keep on teaching. I only had to drive down once a week and I could teach whatever I wanted to advanced students.

*Tell me about the students you encountered at Penn. Were they as bright as the students you encountered at Chestnut Hill College from '68-'74?*

**Lukacs:** I must say yes... I don't know what you mean by bright. But you see, what happened was that I really had my pick of a group of Honors students, and I taught whatever I liked, and I taught some odd courses, whatever interested me. I know this was the best group of students I had ever taught and there were only seven of them. One was a faker, you know. But the other six were wonderful. And they liked my course so much, that without me knowing, they found out that my son, who is a professor, is also a wine expert...

*You are a wine expert!*

**Lukacs:** No, I never was a wine expert. My son is way ahead on this. They found out behind my back which is my favorite French champagne, and I'm not really – I like champagne, but I'm not a champagne addict – and they gave it to me as a present on the last day of class. I was very touched by that.

*That was one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. I read several of your interviews online with Bruce Cole<sup>2</sup> about the writing of history today, and you remark about Tocqueville's comment, “What will be the characteristics of historians in democratic times,” and you rail against the...*

**Lukacs:** There's a tremendous chapter of 48 sentences, and hardly any historian has read this. He (Tocqueville) is prophetic, you know, and I want to tell you that I have just, you see, I have to write, have written a book about this... I'll tell you what happened. I have been blessed with pretty good health. My wife has intestinal flu, which is pretty bad. But I hardly ever have been to a hospital in my life, but last year, yes. I had to have a very severe operation. This was predicted by my cardiologist for thirty years, that, eventually I would have to have that operation, and last

year I had to have it. The operation was quite successful, but it had some postoperative complications, which in that operation happens in almost half the cases, so I was, I didn't suffer, but I was house bound, wired up, miserable, and I had to do something.

*So you wrote a book?*

**Lukacs:** Yes. So I started a book. Again, it was a coincidence in the... I hope you're not going to put all this in the interview

*I won't, go ahead.*

**Lukacs:** You see, it was either '96 or '97, that I was stopped at Penn. That was the last time I taught anywhere. At that time, I did not even have a publisher, because this is also happens at the same time as the publisher who published three or four books of mine, went out of business. Then, the editor-in-chief of Yale University [Press] discovered me in '98. He published a number of books of mine. But again, the publishing business went down again, and this man, who was the chief, left Yale two years ago. For example, Yale did not want to publish my correspondence with Kennan, which was stupid... I had the correspondence, well, I had to put it together and all that. But I was thinking about history writing and I offered this to the substitute woman at Yale, and she was interested. So I wrote a book, a very small book, and titled *The Future of History* and this will be published by Yale next spring.

*Can you give me some kernels from it? Because it seems to me, as someone who had responsibility for the curriculum of a high school, when Howard Zinn's People's History of the United States came into fashion, and all the American history teachers added the People's History, even on the AP US History list of books, and now we have The Patriot's History of the United States, written by Michael Allen and Larry Schweikart. So you've got the people's history and the patriot's history. And what would you would to history teachers, "Include both of them"?*

**Lukacs:** Eh, alright. This new book has six chapters and, as is so often in history, and in individual life too, there are contradictory developments.

*You always taught us that in our classes with you.*

**Lukacs:** The contradictory development is that the general, while on one hand or the one side, the crisis in literature, painting, arts, music, did not touch professional history until about 1960. I'm not speaking of myself, but in 1960, history was taught, researched, published, everything, pretty much as it was fifty or sixty years before that. Not since. And, what is also regrettable, this is not unlike what happened in colleges, but in 1970, as you know, required history courses

disappeared in colleges, universities, even high schools. There were not enough teaching jobs, and the historical professionals, especially historians who were well-situated, were ignorant about this. So you know, there was a great decrease in interest in history about this time, and it never recovered. At the same time, however, there was another development, an unpredictable development, that most professional historians are not aware of. Again, beginning about 1960, there began a great appetite for history. “Appetite,” and I’m not speaking of the nutrition. You see, this exists in every country. You see an interest in history affecting portions of a population who previously were not interested. You can see evidences of this in the good and bad history books that sell better than novels. In this country, there are three times as many local historical societies as there were fifty years ago; the same with history programs on television, you know.

*Yes, such as the popularity of the History Channel.*

**Lukacs:** So, in my new book, I’m dealing with this dual development.

*Do you think it’s more than just cultural entertainment? Do you think it’s a genuine appetite, or is the nutrition missing?*

**Lukacs:** The nutrition can be bad, but, by and large, appetite is a sign of some health. It’s not well fed, but there it is. This is what the book is about. In the end, some speculation they won’t entirely like but I speculate on what will happen when books disappear.

*In the form they are...*

**Lukacs:** Yes, in the form they are. It’s a short book; it’s not going to be more than two hundred pages.

*As someone who teaches history – sections of my Villanova University course are historical – I struggle with this. You mention this in Democracy and Populism, that when you assigned a research paper to us in 1970, there was a bound authority to turn to. Today, however, there is, as you called it, a “fantastic proliferation,” papers, documents, blogs. Where does the record of history go?*

**Lukacs:** I’ve noticed this only second hand, because I’m still in touch with history teachers, and they all complain that they cannot control where the students get this stuff from the internet.

*Right, and the students can’t gauge the quality, as well as the quantity, of their research.*

**Lukacs:** And this, you see, is in an age where I have no experience with this.

*Although I think I remember reading one of your comments that when you write a book, you get rid of all your papers, that you don't save everything the way that a Churchill...*

**Lukacs:** Well, that depends. Right now I'm writing an article and – it's interesting, I don't always do this – I'm writing the main draft pretty much the way it exists in my mind, and then I go through the books and see what else I can add for the sake of illustrating the argument. But I don't always work that way.

*It struck me, having been both taught by you and subsequently reading nearly all your books, that as I sit in your library today, I can easily see from where the extraordinary breadth and the depth of your references came from.*

**Lukacs:** Well, the library... This is interesting, a very short article about a meeting between Churchill and Stalin, and you know I did books on Churchill and Stalin, but I'm working on this right now, right before you came, and I'm much slower than I used to be... And I don't have to go to the libraries. I can no longer do serious research because I'm too old to get to the libraries. It is a great pity because you go to libraries, you go to archives, you know what you're looking for, but you always find some odd things.

*One of the things you write about in your histories about people is that we too often ignore the existence of free will.*

**Lukacs:** Oh very important, which goes against the modern scientific view.

*How firmly do you hold onto that despite the advances of neurosciences and psychology?*

**Lukacs:** Absolutely. This is something to do with whatever I believe in religiously, too. Every human being is responsible, and here a Catholic element enters, for what he does, or what he says, and even for what he thinks.

*I love your statement that, "People don't have ideas, they choose them."*

**Lukacs:** I always believed in the importance of ideas. It is the ideas, you know, what people think and believe that makes history, not material conditions. But it took me sixty, seventy years to suddenly realize that these ideas don't exist in the abstract. Ideas only matter when they connect with people, and people choose ideas.

*Can people change their beliefs?*

**Lukacs:** With difficulty, but they do.

*You write very compellingly about this in Democracy and Populism – almost prophetically as it was written in 2004 and published in 2005 – and if you read this now in 2010, you look like Jeremiah. When you look now at the unity around hatred in this country, and the fear, and those two emotions going back and forth and the Tea Party movement...*

**Lukacs:** This is by and large, you see, the difficulty as the two emotions overlap, but they are not the same; the difference is between ideas and beliefs. People believe what they want to believe, what is comfortable to them, and this has bad signs, because it is comfortable for you to believe that the reason you are not advancing in your job because others are intriguing against you. This may be true, or this may be not true. People choose ideas. At my funeral some may call me an idealist, but it took me a long time to realize this. It's not like German Idealism during the zeitgeist; this is a principle idea: it's true, but it's not true enough.

*That was also a famous quote of yours, “True, but not true enough.” You ingrained that in me.*

**Lukacs:** This is... I think it comes from even before I taught you at Chestnut Hill when I read a wonderful statement by an old Irish woman. Her neighbors came to gossip, saying, “Is this true about the young widow in the street?” and she said, “It's not true, but it's true enough.” I say that the historian has to proceed in reverse, that these things may be true, but they're not true enough.

*I get exactly what you mean, and puncturing what was the consensus, about what happened, or what is happening is always what I took from your teaching. You left me with a healthy skepticism that the easy interpretation is not necessarily the true one...*

**Lukacs:** Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

*The only direct quote I take from you – and it took me years to figure out what you meant and why you were correct – was, one day I came to your class in the spring of 1970 – and, again, we would never have missed your class – so I had left the sit-in in Sister Mary Xavier's office, which I was co-leading with another history major, Jane O'Donnell – a brilliant history major – and the both of us left the sit-in to come to your class. When we walked in, very smug about “our student revolution,” which – you admit, was five years later than most – you looked at us and said, “Scratch any liberal and one day I will find a conservative.” Meaning, what you think you're seeing is not necessarily what will be. This leads me to the principle you've also established, and I hope it is in The Future of History, that history is about the words the historian uses.*

**Lukacs:** Exactly. Facts are inseparable from the words in which we state them. Realize that history consists of words.



*With this tool, the words of a historian, what obligations does the historian have?*

**Lukacs:** And it's not only stylistic. Suppose I talk to my wife... of course we're going to have dinner tonight, and I try to be very cooperative as she is ill. You see, the choice of every word is not merely stylistic, it is a moral choice.

*And therefore a moral responsibility for the historian.*

**Lukacs:** Yes, as it is in everyday life.

*It seems to me, even with the popularity of history, that historians are using their words to describe facts to a particular political advantage.*

**Lukacs:** Well many of them do, yes.

*How does one avoid that? What would be your caution to the historians, or even the professors in the classroom, who are under siege?*

**Lukacs:** How to avoid one's political ideological beliefs from influencing? It's difficult. I'm sure I have one too; I prefer some people and some things. That's difficult.

## Notes

1. Mark Atwood Lawrence, "The Heart of a Realist," review of *Through the History of the Cold War*, ed. John Lukacs, *New York Times Book Review*, July 23, 2010, BR22 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/25/books/review/Lawrence-t.html>
2. Bruce Cole, "History in a Democratic Age," *Humanities*, January/February 2003 <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2003-01/democraticage.html>