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# Introduction

frage, *das worauf es ankommt, das wesentliche, der schwerpunct*: das ist die frage, *darum handelt es sich, das musz entschieden warden*.
[*question*, that which matters, the gist, the focal point: *that is the question*, that's what it's about, that must be decided.]

—SECOND ENTRY UNDER "FRAGE" IN THE *DEUTSCHES WÖRTERBUCH* (GERMAN DICTIONARY) OF THE BROTHERS GRIMM (1854)[1]

THIS BOOK IS STRUCTURED as an argument, not in the sense of a claim or contention but in the sense of a dispute. Following an introductory chapter with background on the peculiarities and emergence of questions, I put forward seven distinct arguments regarding the essence of the age of questions. Every chapter advances an argument of its own, but also engages in an argument (dispute) with the others. Readers are invited not only to consider the relative merits of the arguments but above all to gain a more complete perspective on the age by viewing it from different vantages, like a town as viewed from a nearby hillside, from its sewers and prisons, through the eyes of a child or a dandy, from a nearby village, and from stories and songs about it. In the final chapter, the analysis seeks to integrate all the arguments regarding the essence of the age into a single, higher-order one.

The chapters and their arguments are as follows:

*The national argument* is that the age of questions had a British imperial origin, but developed distinctly *national* attributes. It concludes with a case study on Hungary, which possessed both imperial and national status and ambitions, to illustrate the trajectory of the age.

*The progressive argument* views *emancipation* as the watchword of a fundamentally reformist and sometimes revolutionary age.

*The argument about force* is that *universal war* and *genocide*, the Final Solution, represent the fullest realization of the age of questions.

*The federative argument* proposes that the *erasure of boundaries* was the shared ideal of the age, elaborated through some of the same queristic tendencies that gave rise to genocide and emancipation.

In *the argument about farce*, the age of questions appears as a mischievous and often malicious *pretense*.

*The temporal argument* proposes that time was the *éminence grise* of the age of questions, for which *timing* was everything. Questions came and went, rose and fell, raised hell, mutated, and disappeared, but above all they were self-consciously *of their time* while straining to become timeless.

*The suspension-bridge argument* unites all opposites into one, mimicking an age that sought to do just that. Querists wanted to *span contradictions* between reality and an ideal, between timeliness and timelessness, between the universal and the particular. Their questions were a way of being in two places at once.

By design, certain pieces of evidence appear in different chapters to support divergent claims. The chapters also contain arguments that recur and are strengthened across the book. These overarching patterns can be summarized as follows:

The formulation "the x question" emerged slowly over the end of the eighteenth century and gathered momentum in the first decades of the nineteenth. Instead of being understood as questions to be answered, these were treated as problems to be solved. Some of the earliest questions were born in clusters during and after the Napoleonic Wars and were defined in opposition to their scholastic predecessors. Whereas scholastic questions were timeless, the "x question" was to be very much *of its time.* The formulation appeared in treaty negotiations, parliamentary debates, and related pamphlets, and Great Britain was very likely its birthplace. Querists soon emerged in France, the German states, the Habsburg Empire, and North America. By the second half of the nineteenth century, questions were being discussed and debated in nearly every language of Europe and beyond: into Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

What I call the "age of questions" began in the 1820s and 1830s as a result of the expansion and politicization of press distribution, the enlargement of the voting franchise (in Britain), and a tight series of international events. These three developments gave rise to an international public sphere, the habitat in which questions thrived and proliferated. The attendant international events included: the Greek uprising in the Ottoman Empire (1821–1832), ultimately resulting in the independence of Greece; debates in the British parliament around the Bill for Removal of Jewish Disabilities (1830) and the reform act for the expansion of the voting franchise (1832); the Polish November uprising in tsarist Russia (1830–1831), crushed by tsarist troops; the Belgian Revolution (1830–1839), resulting in Belgium's independence; the French invasion and conquest of Ottoman Algiers (1830); the Mehmet Ali crisis in the Ottoman Empire (1831–1833), which resulted in the Great Powers coming together to prevent Ottoman collapse; and the July Revolution (1830) and the June rebellion (1832), which codified popular sovereignty in France.

Since questions were irritants that begged a timely solution, the age of questions had an allergy to the present. The many individuals

who weighed in on questions—I call them *querists*—wanted change.[2] Being allergic to the present suggests movement *forward*, so the fundamental impulse of the age often *appears* progressive. But moving away from the present is not *inherently* progressive, nor were querists themselves.

Early on, querists had a fairly mathematical understanding of questions: they viewed them like math problems that could have only one solution, like 2 x 2 = 4. One-solution thinking implied that a question/problem could be solved once and for all, so querists sought a definitive or final solution. But not everyone agreed on whether something was a question/problem or not, and oftentimes querists created or wielded questions to serve a political purpose or personal gain, or accused each other of doing so. Certainly when querists made their interventions, they generally had a particular solution in mind, so they defined a question so as to make their preferred solution seem the more attractive or obvious. Part of defintion was assigning a date of origin. Birthdates were often chosen strategically to point to a particular definition, and hence solution, of a question.

The realm of questions was highly contentious and competitive: querists sought to raise the profile of their questions in order to draw attention to preferred solutions. Because querists generally worked backward from favored solutions, there were often as many different formulations and definitions of a question as there were solutions (or querists). The question: "What *was* the Eastern question?" might seem a simple one, and many seemingly straightforward answers have been offered, such as that the Eastern question was the matter of how to manage the decline of the Ottoman Empire. But since the "Eastern question" was defined by individual querists in accordance with their desired future, some defined the question/problem as the presence of Muslim Turks in Europe, for others it was Russian expansion, or Poland's right to exist, and for still others it was about the looming Apocalypse and the Second Coming of Christ. Querists deployed questions to stake out the terrain of the future. While there was overlap between some

of their plots, such overlap was not common but rather disputed terrain. Assigning a singular definition to any given question belies one of querism's essential features; its competitive spirit.

Not everyone could create or weigh in on questions, but by the end of the nineteenth century, the number of querists swelled considerably, representing different professions, ages, genders, nationalities, and walks of life. Their interventions came mostly in the publicistic realm of newspapers and pamphlets but could also be found in government correspondence and parliamentary debate; there were even some periodic leaks of questions into poetry, fiction, philosophy, and scientific works. When this happened the publicistic boundary was often policed by other querists.

The publicistic habitat of questions was a function of their deliberate timeliness and urgency. As some lingered over decades and even a century, however, querists began to lose faith in final solutions and started to see questions as chronic or recurring. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the mathematical model was yielding to a medical one: the driving metaphor was no longer the mathematical problem or equation to be solved, but instead one of an illness to be cured or a biological condition, such as hunger, that could recur. This meant that a question periodically had to be addressed anew.

It was mostly around wars and periods of social and political upheaval that questions were most hotly debated and discussed, and when querists hoped for expedient solutions. At other times, a question might seem to recede or even disappear. The fickleness of questions resulted in a series of common strategies among querists: To gain attention or promote a particular solution, they tied their questions to larger ones and to ones that had been solved the way querists wanted theirs to be solved. Size mattered for querists, who often declared their questions to be of *Europe-* or *worldwide* significance and therefore "everyone's" problem. They also regularly cast questions as vital, a matter of life and death. In the words of Fyodor Dostoevsky, "a question like 'to be or not to be.'"[3] Querists also inserted urgency into these discussions by

outlining what would happen if a given question were *not* solved in accordance with their wishes: common threats were violence, civic unrest, and war.

These strategies had four significant implications. First, insofar as questions were cast as vital, they were presumed to penetrate into multiple realms of human existence (science, religion, politics, metaphysics, economics, etc.). This meant that a solution had to be *fundamental* enough to penetrate into all those realms. Some querists argued, for example, that a solution to the social question would necessarily entail the creation of a whole new man, or that a solution to the Polish question would require the total reinvention of international diplomacy.

Second, insofar as querists bundled questions together and implied that one could not be solved without addressing or at least affecting the other(s), both questions and querists' wished-for solutions grew larger and more wide ranging, such that solving them was also presumed to require international cooperation.

Thirdly, as querists bundled questions together so that it seemed impossible to solve one without addressing the other(s), they often threatened a *universal* war if their questions were not expediently solved. Finally, since bundled questions were presumed to require a *Europe-* or *worldwide* solution, querists frequently proposed federation, or the elimination of borders, as the omnibus solution. Some even viewed the necessity of powers to act together to solve questions as the practical basis for such a federation.

In short, many querists threatened that if there was no omnibus solution, universal war would result. But in order to eliminate existing boundaries and create the conditions for federation, a universal war was required. So querists presented universal war as both a threat and a promise, an outcome to be avoided at all costs and the only means of achieving a desired outcome. The age of questions made the Great War *thinkable*. Querists also increasingly posited a relationship between the geopolitical questions of the East and the social questions of the West, arguing that changing a border in the Balkans to address the Eastern question, for

example, could inflame the social question and precipitate a revolution in France.

The Crimean War and later the Great War entranced many querists, who believed that universal war would bring about longed-for solutions. After the postwar peace treaties of 1918–1920, a number of questions were considered "solved," at least in part. But the losers of World War I—dissatisfied with the status quo—became especially active querists during the interwar period. Hitler was one of them. He bundled questions together, insisting they needed to be solved together, and saw universal war and the elimination of boundaries as the path to the great omnibus solution (including but not limited to *the* Final Solution).

The most general characterization of the age, one that encompasses all of the aforementioned features, is that querists used questions to span contradictions. They often argued that a question/problem arose out of a contradiction, or a gap between a universal ideal and a particular reality. Queristic interventions were like large shoes devised to span the gap. They made it possible, in a sense, to be in two places at once. But like large shoes, they left an outsize footprint on the terrain of nineteenth- and twentieth-century history, such that the efforts of querists appear variously as poignant ambition, destructive hubris, and comedic vanity.

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