

THE CHALLENGES OF HISTORICAL OBJECTIVITY: HISTORY AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE PAST AND PRESENT

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Abstract

Everyone brings his own mind to the study of history, and approaches it from the point of view which is characteristic of himself and his generation. The attempt to eliminate this 'subjective element' from history is always insincere-it means keeping your own point of view while asking other people to give up theirs-and always unsuccessful. The attainment of historical objectivity in history and historical writing has been found to be challenged by clash of ideas, personalities, personal histories, opinions, interpretations, social pressures, and different ages. In response to this, this paper excurses into the mixed and myriad challenges that are vexing the possibility of achieving total objectivity or achieving a reasonable degree of objectivity in history. The paper concludes that for the foreseeable future, different views is a better step towards achieving the goal of history and objectivity is the best tool to enhance bodies of historical knowledge.

1.0 Introduction

Individuals, communities, societies could scarcely exist if all knowledge of the past was wiped out. As memory is to the individual, so history is to the community or society. Without memory, individuals find great difficulty in relating to others, in finding their bearings, in taking intelligent decisions - they lose their sense of identity. A society without knowledge of its past would be like and individual without memory. It is only through sense of history that communities establish their identity, orientate themselves, understand their relationship to the past and to other communities and societies. Without history (knowledge of the past), we and our communities would be utterly adrift on an endless and featureless sea of time (Marwick2001:30). In other words, history is a necessity as historical knowledge is essential to the society.

To understand contemporary problems, to take part in contemporary debate, we need history. If we wish to discuss contemporary moralities, we can only do so effectively by making comparisons with past moralities.

2.0 Understanding the Nature of History and Objectivity in History

A training in history is a training in analyzing, evaluating and interpreting both secondary and primary sources. It develops an understanding that everything written pertaining to history, secondary or primary, must be approached with skepticism and caution. It develops the ability to distinguish between pieces of writing which are well substantiated and logical and those which imply express theory, hypothesis, or opinion.

The craving for an interpretation of history is so deep-rooted that unless we have a constructive outlook over the past, we are drawn either to mysticism or to cynicism (Powicke1955:174). History is not only a record of progress but a “progressive science” – as the course of events and as the record of those events. Historians of later generation do not look forward to any such prospect of producing “ultimate history”. They consider that knowledge of the past has come down through one or more human minds, has been processed by them, and therefore cannot consist of elemental and impersonal atoms which nothing can alter. The exploration seems to be endless, and some impatient scholars take refuge in skepticism, since all historical judgments involve persons and points of view, one is as good as another and there is no “objective” historical truth(Collingwood 1946).

Every historical account is dependent upon explanation and appreciation. In other words, we cannot see the past in a single communicable picture except from a point of view, which implies a choice, a personal perspective. (Carr1961) notes that it is impossible that two historians, especially two historians living in different periods, should see historical personality in the same light. Historians, like scientists, build upon the discoveries of their predecessors, bring new evidence, new techniques, and new approaches to bear in refining, correcting, and sometimes rejecting existing interpretations. Historians do not attempt to “show” us the past (just as they do not attempt to reconstruct it), what they present is “knowledge about the past” and it is never, naturally, the whole past, but always just some limited aspect which the historian has chosen to investigate- that is

where the choice lies; historians choose, or are directed towards, particular, manageable topics, as is the case in all scientific disciplines.

(Collinwood 1946:127) argues that historians in different ages are captives of their own age, and therefore produce different historical interpretations, and the every-individual-is-different argument that, even when belonging to the same age, historians have different personalities, different personal histories, and therefore produce different historical interpretations.

In delivering to his Cambridge audience in the early 1960s the series of sparkling and urban lectures to which he gave the title “What is History”, Edward Hallett Carr advised that history is not disembodied knowledge existing on library shelves. He also advised that one should know the historian before going on to read the history. He said that history is an unending dialogue between the past and present. The point that Carr was really trying to get over is that history in each age is governed by the preoccupations and prejudices of that age and is therefore, in its own way, just as subjective as the history written in past ages.

Arguments about subjectivity in history tend to focus far too much on individual, isolated historians, and not enough on the profession as a whole: and they tend to focus on the wrong aspects of the individual historian’s work. The subjectivity or the fallibility of the history lies as much in the establishing of the facts as in writing them up. Frequently, the sources are inclusive, obscure, or contradictory. It is this which forces historians to bring in elements of conjecture and interpretation.

The standard line from Carr (1961:8) is that the subjectivity lies in the way in which the historian freely choosing, or compelled by the imperatives of ideology and discursivity, selects and arranges the facts. He argued that the word objectivity itself is misleading and question-begging. He further argued that the social sciences and history cannot accommodate themselves to a theory of knowledge which puts subject and object asunder, and enforces a rigid separation between the observer and the thing observed.

The facts of history cannot be purely objective, since they become facts of history only in virtue of the significance attached to them by the historian. Objectivity in history cannot be objectivity of fact but only of relation, of the relation between

the fact and interpretation between past, present, and future. The historian who contests, say, the verdict of one of his predecessors will normally condemn it, not as absolutely false, but as inadequate or one-sided or misleading. The historian, in his task of interpretation needs his standard of significance, which is also his standard of objectivity, in order to distinguish between the significant and the accidental.

The fragmentary nature of historical evidence places a barrier in the ways of the historian seeking the whole truth. We are forbidden by the past to know anything which it has not of itself allowed. No historian today will echo confidence in the prospect of “ultimate history”. But some historians who have a long-term vision over the past and over the future write history which is more durable, and has more of this ultimate and objective character, than others.

Carr observed that the necessity to establish basic facts of history rests not on any quality in the facts themselves, but on an *apriori* decision of the historian.

In the opinion of Walsh (1967:95), the question of objectivity in history is the most important and the most baffling topic in the critical philosophy of history. The complete record of the past is impossible because some events have left no traces at all. Some traces have also disappeared. Other has at best left only fragmentary evidence. Objectivity is regarded as one of the characteristics which must be present in any knowledge that claims to be scientific.

The debate whether history is objective or not can be traced to the 19th century. It was associated with the development of the positivist theory which centered on the desire to base the study of history and consequently that of society, on a series of general laws. What does it mean when it is said that a piece of knowledge is objective? Can history attain scientific objectivity?

Objectivity is defined as the disassociation of the investigator from the object of investigation so that the same conclusion can be reached by independent investigators (Walsh 1967:95). By this definition, we are looking at objectivity in the absolute sense and if so rigidly taken, it may not apply to any inquiry. This is because the idea of complete dissociation from the object of investigation is inapplicable not to history but also to science. The truth is that there is always an

element of the human factor that is involved in historical so well as scientific inquires.

Marwick (1981:100) argues that “the gifted scientist will usually develop a “feel” for his subject... his “feel” will take him in the direction of trying one kind of experiment rather than another...” The definition of objectivity which calls for the complete elimination of the human element from all inquiries is, therefore, not entirely acceptable. Therefore, the crucial point is the extent to which the human factor is either reflected or involved in the result of historical and scientific inquires. Compared to history, scientists have evolved a methodology which ensures that the human element is reduced to the barest minimum in scientific investigation.

Scientific objectivity cannot be attained in history. By “scientific objectivity” we mean a body of knowledge in which there is separation between the investigation and the object if investigation thereby making it possible for all investigators of the same object to arrive at the same conclusion.

A number of factors explain why scientific objectivity is not possible in history. These factors are found in the nature of history itself-where pursuit of knowledge involves a measure of interaction and interdependence between the set subject and object. The subjectivity or fallibility of the historian certainly does involve selection and writing up as much as research. This is because, in a manner very different from the sciences, the topic historians investigate, being concerned with the actions and attitudes of human being within communities and societies, are intimately bound up with values, and where there are values it is almost impossible to avoid value judgments. Here, undoubtedly, the political or moral outlook, the mental set, of the individual historian is likely to influence the contributions to historical knowledge he/she makes. For historians, the temptation to play to the gallery is greater than that faced by most scientists.

It is contended that historians cannot possibly write down everything there is on a topic, even the most narrowly defined. It means that the historian is forced to select from the total information available to him in records of all kinds and no matter how he may explain his choice there is usually a personal factor involved. To a large extent, the selection which the historian makes influences the result of his investigation. This is the basis of fear expressed by (Atkinson 1978:73) when

he says that “in making selection, historians will be expressing their personal and class prejudice”.

This necessarily compromises the idea of objectivity. Historians search for truth about what happened in the past but the past is not open to direct inspection. It means that historians must necessarily study documents which are the evidence of the past and this appears in different forms-oral traditions, languages, numismatics, archaeological artifacts among others. The importance of every fact depends on the interpretation given to it by the historian. The belief “in the hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy”. The facts are available to the historian in documents, inscriptions, among others, like fish on the fishmonger’s slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him. This recalls the favourite dictum of the great liberal journalist, C. P. Scott “Facts are sacred, opinion is free”. It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The fact speaks only when the historian calls on them; it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context. No document can tell more than what the author of the document thought-what the thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or only what he himself thought he thought.

The historian and the facts of history are necessary to one another. The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless. The historian is neither the humble slave nor the tyrannical master of his facts. The historian is engaged on a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts. It is impossible to assign primacy to one over the other.

At this juncture, we shall examine some prevailing theories on objectivity in history.

3.0 Theories of Objectivity

3.1 The Skeptical Theory of Objectivity

This theory maintains that certain moral and metaphysical beliefs are behind different historical interpretations and these beliefs are not scientific in nature (Walsh 1967:108).

This implies that historical thinking has something irreducibly subjective about it that colours any understanding of the past. Hence this theory denies the possibility of objectivity in history. This theory removed the distinction which historians often make between history and propaganda. History has a methodology which, if followed, results in the writing of an objective historical account. On the other hand where the historical methodology is ignored, the account which is produced faces a serious danger of being labeled as propaganda and hence of no value.

3.2 The Positivist Theory of Objectivity

The main thesis of this theory is the attainment in history of a single point of view based on set of presuppositions which all historians might be prepared to accept.

The positivists believe that the objectivity attained in science is also attainable in history. They argue that, given the use by historians of the method of investigation used by natural scientist, what the natural scientist has achieved in the study of nature could also be achieved in the study of society. The positivist theory is opposed to any procedure of investigation that is not reducible to scientific method. It holds that science is the only valid knowledge and the facts are the only possible objects of knowledge. Hence the theory draws a dividing line between historical facts and interpretation. It contends that since interpretation of facts brings about discrepancies in historical accounts, historians should avoid interpreting facts; they should merely present the facts as they were.

Leopold Von Ranke (1795-1866) and Augustus Comte (1798-1857) were some of the known positivists.

(Smith 1978:1-11), states that the theory undermines an important element in the writing of history, that is, interpretation of facts. If a writer does not interpret, he becomes a chronicler not a historian. The historian must concern himself with both narration and interpretation. This is what Robert Smith calls the “why” and “how” aspects of history. The historian must not neglect interpretation which is the “life blood” of history.

3.3 The Perspectivist Theory of Objectivity

The thesis of this theory is that every historian considers the past from a particular standpoint. It avers that any history is a product of two factors viz: the first is the subjective element of the historian and the second is the evidence upon which his account is based. However, the existence of the first factor would appear to prevent any historian from reliving the past as it actually was. The prespectivists disagree sharply with positivists. Ranke and his followers were labeled historians without imagination. The prespectivists contend that it is not enough for a historian to collect his material and write them down as they occurred. That would amount to what Collingwood calls the “scissors and paste” approach to history.

For the prespectivists, therefore, the idea of interpretation does not negate objectivity. The facts must be accepted that no historian starts out with his mind blank, to be gradually filled by the evidence; the historian always has a pre-conceived idea. It is against this background that the prepectivists contend that objectivity can be attained if the historian follows certain fundamental rules the historians must properly securitize his evidence; he accepts conclusions only when there is good evidence for them and he must maintain intellectual integrity and honesty in his arguments as well as presentations. As Ernest Scott (1925) declares “there is no finality in history...” The purpose is to arrive at a perfection of knowledge. Objective historical account should be based on deep research and hence, should be able to stand the test of time. With this understanding, one can appreciate why each generation re-interprets its history.

4.0 History as a Bridge between the Past and Present

What happened in the past profoundly affects all aspects of our lives in the present and will, indeed, affect what happens in the future (Marwick 2001:22). The past is all-persuasive. But what exactly is ‘the past’? Clearly, it signifies ‘what actually happened’-events which have taken place, societies which have risen and fallen, ideas and institutions, eating habits, marital customs, all aspects of human behavior in the past, matters large and small. Traces of the past exist in the memories, traditions and ceremonies that are relayed from generation to generation. All human societies betray a preoccupation with their own past, whether through ancestor worship, the invocation of past triumphs by ‘witch doctors’ or ‘medicine men’, the scriptures and chronicles of holy men and monks,

or the regular mounting of national parades and ceremonies. Much, of course, of what is preserved, celebrated, and passed on from age to age may have only a tenuous relationship to the past as it really happened; much of it may well be 'myth' or 'fable'. But the myth believed by one generation and passed on to the next also becomes a part of this awesomely large and clusters of events and ideas, great systems and trivial pursuits, 'the past'. The past can only be apprehended through memories, myths, and, most important, through the relics and 'sources', archaeological, written, printed, painted among others-that it leaves. Historians do not 'construct' or 'reconstruct' the past; they provide knowledge about the workings of these phenomena. The human past has determined much of the built environment, the political boundaries which divide country from country, their forms of government, the precise character of social and economic distinctions, the sources of tension within and between nations: deep in the past lie beliefs and prejudices, modes of thought, the rise, spread and fission of religious faiths, conquests and atrocities, all still exercising potent sway today. Contemporary morality can only be discussed effectively by making comparisons with past moralities. To understand contemporary problems, to take part in contemporary debate, we need history. History consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems, and the main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate; for, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording.

5.0 Conclusion

History should be focused on as the bodies of knowledge produced by the labour of many thousands of members of the historical professions, not as the isolated product of auteurs. In history, there is no Rembrandts, no Shakespeares, and no Beethovens. The works of historians is constantly being revised, modified and even updated: on the whole we don't go in for revising Rembrandts or updating Beethoven. The articles and books of historians, even the most famous, are merely contributions to knowledge and are subject to debate among professional colleagues, and to qualification and correction.

History is meaningless in a static world and in its essence is change, movement. In history itself, the belief that we have come from somewhere is closely linked with the belief that we are going somewhere. A society which has lost belief in its

capacity to progress in the future will quickly cease to concern itself with its progress in the past.

Objectivity is useful in history to the extent that it serves as a methodological tool to prevent the historian from reflecting biases and prejudice in his account. If this is to be achieved, then it is unnecessary to have universally accepted conclusions in history. To have different views is better because it will be a step towards achieving the goal of history which is understanding the past.

What we think about objectivity says something about what we think about the modern world, in so far as our opinions about objectivity are related to our stances on larger issue such as progress, the role of science in our common life, and the possibility for a truly democratic public sphere. Is true objectivity even possible? Whose interests does it serve? To construct a history of objectivity often means, in part, to make political point about current conditions. Historians are human beings like everyone else, and the historical account they fashion are influenced by the same social contexts as other historical actors. They must take into account the technological regimes in which they find themselves, the normative frames that dominate the discourse which they participate, and the economic demands of the institution they work in and attempt to describe.

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