

HISTORY: THE MEANING AND ROLE OF HISTORY IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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I was interested mostly in history because I really did want to try and make some sense out of what the hell was going on...I figured from my education, my reading, that history was the best way to figure out the way the world ticked.

(American historian, William Appleman Williams, recalling his student concerns in 1945, in MAHRO, 1984)

We can not give life to the dead, but we can give them voice. We can not give justice to the victims, but we can shake the living from their moral lethargy to change things in the present that are the consequences of the past.

(Australian historian, Greg Denning, 2000, in Ashplant and Roper, 2001)

Summary

At best, history is classified among the social sciences, of which it rates as the least scientific.

(Jared Diamond, 1997)

History is the study of the past in order to understand the meaning and dynamics of the relationship between cause and effect in the overall development of human societies. Its key feature is its broad range of inquiry, as it is as much concerned with wide perspectives, general explanations, and fundamental questions, as with specific detail or events, and the particular interpretation of sources and evidence. The claim of history is not so much its capacity to capture immense detail, or to record knowledge of the past,

but to interpret, to handle a rich variety of sources in order to draw out their general relevance or to reveal their general significance for human understanding of why and how change occurs. Few historians would contest the view that history is not a science as a discipline of study, but is more a branch of the arts or humanities. It can be seen, at most, as a social science, and even then could not be defined as scientific in any exact or predictive sense.

The purpose of this essay is to provide you with a series of perspectives intended to convey a sense of the relevance, breadth, interest, and stimulus, which exemplify historical learning, and the usefulness of contemporary history in particular. The text is constructed as a set of guiding commentaries on the characteristics and place of history in human existence, ranging from its definition as historiography, to its key contribution to understanding of the interaction between present and future.

Drawing on case material provided by a set of associated theme articles, this overview text seeks to provide you with a general sense of what it is historians do, and how they practice their craft, focusing on four central assumptions. First, there is the question of differing ways of using and reading evidence: there is no “true” or single meaning to be constructed from written or unwritten sources. Second, there is the issue of how much we can actually learn from the past, or of acknowledging the limits of historical knowledge. A third consideration is that historical questions can be asked in different ways, from multiple human perspectives. And fourth, there is the crucial question of the uses to which history can be put. The area of history is always challenging: is it merely the traditional narrative of the nation and the development of one or other kind of society, or is it also an exploration of the way life has been lived in households and within family structures?

1. Introduction

As the twentieth century has drawn to a close and we move into an expanding new era, the complex meanings, intrinsic qualities, purposes, and value of history require serious attention. For the diverse and rich social foundations of life, whether language, material culture, national identity, or the organization of work and politics, are the palpable inheritance of a resilient human past, and if humanity is to plot a realizable future, we need to understand through history how it has achieved its present. The usefulness of history, therefore, is not only that it constantly offers new ways of viewing and understanding the grip of the past: it is also a means of generating the confidence about, and absorption of, critical knowledge, to produce a changing consciousness. In bringing the potential of human action to the center of investigation, the dynamics of historical understanding can contribute actively to the shaping of our future, always emphasizing that it can be one of possibilities and alternatives. History, then, is a form of inquiry which is never prescriptive or rigidly predictive about the impact of systems or of events.

2. The Meaning of History

In its very earliest known uses in human society, history was simply a narrative account of past events. As a word, it entered the English language from the French formulation of *histoire*, the Latin notion of *historia*, and the Greek construction of *istoria*, each of

which represented the basic sense of a knowledge of the past. In these early concepts, the sense of history encompassed both an imaginative story of events and a narrative or chronicle of past events. In its early English usage, history and story were generally applied equally to any account of the past, whether of imaginary events or of incidents which were held to be true. Such use of history for imagined or invented events is, of course, a practice which has persisted, at diminishing levels, up to the present. It continues to be embedded especially in imaginative literature, such as the novel. This can take the form of an attempt at fictional realism, as in J. G. Farrell's 1970s story, *The Singapore Grip*, which recreates the Japanese invasion of Singapore in 1941, blending established historical facts with an invented story. Or, it can be the deliberate novelistic fabrication of a "counterfactual" history, as in Robert Harris's 1980s story, *Fatherland*, which is based on the premise of Nazi Germany having won the Second World War.

From roughly the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onwards, the meaning of history moved more emphatically towards an account of past real events, and the notion of story drifted towards a set of uses which included less documented accounts of past events, and accounts of purely imagined events or fantasy. History now began to take on the distinctive character or sense of an organized knowledge of the past. The notion of some organization of knowledge of the past was a general extension of the earlier sense of a specific written or oral account. Through the development of this sense of history emerged the distinctly modern meanings and role of historian, historical, and historic.

Writers on historiography and culture confirm that in contemporary English, this has become the predominant and lasting general sense of history. At the same time, it is important to note the growth of a further significant conception of history which goes beyond the basic meaning of an organized knowledge of past life. It is difficult to date or to define its intellectual source exactly, but it is the sense of history as something continuous, as human or self-development. This particular stage of thinking is increasingly evident in European thought from around the eighteenth century, and saw early expression in the emergence of new forms of universal histories or world histories, based on the imperial sense of a "discovery" or physical charting of the world. Adopting the argument of the cultural critic, Raymond Williams, the clearest way of projecting this newer post-eighteenth century sense of history is to say that past events are viewed not as specific or bounded histories, but as a continuous and connected process.

For historians, various modern systemizations and interpretations of this continuous and connected process then become history in a new general and increasingly abstract sense. Moreover, in view of the prevailing new stress on the workings of history as human self-development, history in many of its wider uses sheds its exclusive association with knowledge of the past, and becomes directly connected not only to the present, but also to the future. Thus, in a language such as German, the terminology of *Geschichte* for history carries the verbal connotation of a process which means an amalgam of past, present, and future.

In turn, history encoded in this contemporary sense has drawn on several evolving versions of more recent intellectual systems. One has been the European Enlightenment awareness of the progress and development of civilization. Another has been rooted in an idealist sense, as reflected by the philosopher Hegel, of an ineluctable process of

world-historical movement over time. A third sense of process, especially important since the nineteenth century, has been sharply political. Here, through a strong association with, first, the French Revolution, and subsequently with Marxism and variants of socialist thought, history has been construed as a range of mass historical forces. In this systemic sense of history, its forces are products of the past which are not only active and influential in the present, but which will live on as imperatives, destined to shape the future in knowable or patterned ways. Naturally, there has always been scholarly dispute between such varying understandings of history as a structured process. Furthermore, there has always been controversy between advocates of history as a systemic movement, and others who have continued to view history as an account, or a series of accounts, of actual but quite random past events. In this looser conception, the sweep of history carries no clearly discernible design or implication of the shape of the future.

An influential twentieth century derivation from history is “historicism,” or the identification of study of the past as being historicist. One of its functional usages has been both basic and neutral, as a description of a method of scholarly study which is based upon the assembling of facts of the past, and the tracing of visible precedents to explain current events. A second sense of historicism has been more ideological in intent and controversial in record. Here, it has been used abrasively, to discredit the deeper meaning of history as a continuing sequence of productive human stages, a process with ineluctable implications for the future. At this level, it has been used in critiques not only of Marxism, but also of Idealist and Enlightenment definitions of history as an upward process.

Some scholars have also suggested that it is not always easy to distinguish attacks on history as historicism, which essentially rejects the notion of history embodying a necessary or probable future, from associated attacks on the notion of any predictive future (in the sense of an improved or more developed life), which uses the idea of a lesson or of lessons of history in arguing against an uncritical hope or faith in human progress. This second, cautionary perspective on history as a forward or optimistic process has been a particularly striking feature of the twentieth century in particular. In contrast with the buoyant sense of positive achievement or promise of earlier versions of historical movement, history since the earlier twentieth century has commonly been used to indicate a generally negative pattern of frustration, breakdown, or defeat, or of some explosion or implosion of the gains of civilization.

Lastly, we know that behind human ignorance of the present and uncertainty of the future, the historical forces which have shaped the world are continuing to operate. Equally, at present, it is probably no longer as easy as it once was to confirm which sense or meaning of history is dominant. “Historian” remains a fairly exact description, as in its earlier understanding. “Historical” relates generally to a recorded sense of the past. “Historic” is largely used to imply the dimension of a large or deep process or destiny. “History,” on the other hand, retains something of the variety of meanings and range of uses it has acquired across human time.

At the same time, today it can be said that, in an almost universal sense, history has come to mean an organized knowledge and interpretation of the past, a defining feature

which it shares with archaeology. In this respect, while it has a different and more scientific character as a scholarly discipline, archaeology may also be recognizable as a variant of history. As a distinctive and well-established scholarly discipline, history has developed its own range of methods and discourses. Its field of study continues to be potentially limitless, in that it encompasses the totality of past human experience. That field is also one of critical debate between varying approaches to history. There are major differences and even controversies between some who regard it as an account of an actual past, and others who view it in postmodern terms, as entirely imagined or subjective constructions of the past, a projection of the identity and location of the historian as author.

On the other hand, the matter and manner of history is something which can be readily validated. History shares with literature, art, history of art, and other laboratories of the spirit and the mind, a probing preoccupation with exploring the many hopes, wonders, fears, and darker contradictions of the human condition. Historical understanding turns on the movement of time and space, on the living tissue which provides us with a sense of the workings of cumulative forces, teaches us about the workings of cause and effect, and, most simply, enlightens us about the past. That provision of knowledge is of a particularly special kind, because it shows not only that history has brought humankind to a particular point, but how and why. While the sense of what history is may continue to differ among scholars, it is a primary analytical lens which can teach or show us most kinds of the knowable human past, and virtually every kind of imaginable—if not predictable—human future.

3. History and its Focus

The fundamentally investigative approach to historical understanding can be summarized as a set of guiding propositions. In general, these reflect the following broad concerns:

- A fostering of vibrant and healthy critical debate between differing perspectives, interpretations, and representations of aspects of the past.
- A critical evaluation of sources and evidence of the past, whether written documentation or oral records.
- A representation of the past through clear narrative, explanation, and analysis.
- A careful and systematic study of key societal processes such as relations of political power, or economic interest, or cultural life over time, with a central emphasis on the levers of change and continuity, and on how and why change occurs in human societies.
- A recognition of the study of the past as a continuing process with a momentum which has implications for the future, requiring exploration of, and debate over, how a defined historical past may relate to the present and the future.
- A focus upon reaction, adaptation, and transformation as the core engine of the historical process.
- A recognition that change can be studied historically without assigning to it any finality or transcending of nature: history is a rooted force which cannot be superseded or relegated to some prior existence.

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Biographical Sketch

Bill Nasson is Professor of History at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Born and schooled in South Africa, he received his higher education in Britain, and holds degrees from the Universities of Hull, York, and Cambridge. In addition to academic positions, he has also worked for non-governmental organizations working with refugee students and environmental issues. He has held visiting fellowships at the Universities of Illinois and Cambridge, and the Australian National University. His publications include *Abraham Esau's War* (Cambridge, 1991), *Education: From Poverty to Liberty* (1991), and *The South African War 1899-1902* (London, 1999). He is an editor of the *Journal of African History*.