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Objectivity: A Subject of Discourse in Historical Writing

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Abstract

One of the problems confronting historians in historical writing is the question of objectivity. Objectivity holds that any historical writing should be based on solid facts, devoid of sentiments, biases and prejudice irrespective of tribes, gender, race, sex, and nation. It is simply referred to as “respect for the truth”. It also means the dissociation of investigators from object or subject of investigation so that the same conclusion could be reached on the subject matter. It should be noted that the challenges of objectivity have continued to be the question, which is usually raised among scholars and students of history whenever the nature of history is been discussed. Therefore,

this paper aims at examining the nature of history and problems of objectivity in historical research.

Introduction

Objectivity has been the subject of discourse in historical research. A lot of people including the students of history do not know what it means to say a piece of historical account is objective or otherwise. Many philosophers have rejected the possibility of objective historical knowledge on the ground that there is no given past which to judge rival interpretation. Their reasons for doing so are valid. But this does not demonstrate that we must give up the concept of historical objectivity as such (Mark Bevir 1994). Objectivity is one of the questions which are usually raised among the people especially among historians whenever the nature of history is being discussed (Walsh, 1967). It is one of the features which must be present in any knowledge that claims to be scientific. In the course of this study, efforts will be made to examine some theories on objectivity.

Hegel (1956) pointed out that the debate, whether history is objective or not is associated with the development of the positivist theory which is concerned with the desire to base the study of history on a series of general laws. This background has had considerable influence on the subject of objectivity in history and has made many writers to conclude that history is incapable of attaining absolute objectivity. As rightly observed by Bevir (1994), objective interpretation of history are those which best meet rational criteria of accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, progressiveness, fruitfulness and openness.

In a bid to tackle the problem of objectivity in historical writing, it is therefore necessary to examine and answer some of the pertinent questions relating to this issue, these include the operational definition of objectivity, the nature of history and steps towards attainment of objectivity in historical research. Also, attempt would be made to examine some of the prevailing theories on the subject matter.

What Is Objectivity?

Historically, facts are meaningless without interpretation or judgment. Objectivity means a state of having a comprehensive, systematic record of the past events as they actually happened. Objectivity holds the belief that historical writing should be based on solid facts alone (Henige, 1982). These facts should be devoid of sentiments, emotions, biases and prejudices. It could also refer to the ability of historian to look at nature not as part of himself but ability to detach himself from nature through reasoning and thereby act as a rational being.

In other words, it refers to the ability of historian to stand outside of himself and view things in a detached rational manner. It is also referred to as “*respect for the truth*” (Fadeiye, 2004). In a nutshell, it is the act of dissociating the investigator from the object of investigation so that the same conclusion can be reached by independent investigators. With these definitions, objectivity is viewed in the absolute sense which may not apply to any inquiry (White, 1978). The idea of complete and absolute dissociation from the object is investigation is inapplicable in historical research. In an actual sense, there is always an element of human factor involved in historical inquiries. This view is shared by Pass More when he asserts that “if only those inquiries are objective in which the inquirer begins with a blank mind, then no inquiry whatsoever is objective”. By the time the historian begins to inquire, we already have beliefs, expectation, and interest, even the average and mediocre historian who perhaps believes and pretends that he is merely receptive merely surrendering to the data before him (Smith, 1978).

Given the truth of the above, the definition of objectivity which calls for the complete elimination of the human element from all inquiries is, therefore, not entirely acceptable. However, rather than talk of objectivity in the absolute sense, we shall take the term to mean the degree to which an investigator is able to divest judgment of self and class interest. It is a degree to which a writer is able to exhibit the actual facts, not coloured by his feeling or emotion. However, the

point of argument is, “*can history be objective*”? In answering this question, we shall examine the nature of history.

Otto Von Ranke and the Writing of Objective History

The writing of objective history can be traced to the handiwork of Ranke who was regarded as the pioneer and the father of objectivity. What could be considered as a revolution in historical studies in the 19th century was championed by Otto Von Ranke. He championed his historical revolution which considered of new scientific standard of criticism of sources. This led to the discrediting of formally accepted sources as well as the insistence on the use of primary source as evidence. This idea formed the background from which modern historical scholarship arose.

Ranke’s great influence in writing objective history is primarily due to the critical method that he introduced into historical scholarship, this method however was closely connected with the basic assumptions and ideas that dominate his writing of objective history. Ranke in his work acknowledged the existence of God in his historical writing, he believe that the function of history is to speculate about the cause of history or to construct logical stages of historical development and to find out what actually happened in the past. He recognised that narrative source unavoidably reflect the prejudices of the authors and give a distorted picture. He explained that historian ought to go back to document to validate his historical facts and also the need for research in archives and the development of sophisticated techniques for determining the authenticity of documents and their form of publication. These were the crucial futures of his new critical method, which transformed the study of history.

It is interesting to note that Ranke was a leading figure and the crusader of writing objective history. He posted that it should no longer be accepted to believe in the changing character of human nature. He demonstrated his criticism and scholarship in some of his voluminous work like the history of Latin and Tectonic Nations 1494-1515 which was published. Ranke in his work preached that the past

should be seen from the inside *as it really was* he said, to history has been assigned the office of judging the past of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. It should be noted that the work of Ranke in writing objective history made the history interesting and make people to understand the real meaning of history.

The Nature of History

The nature of history is very wide in scope, a full discussion of which cannot be had in this study. The study will therefore identify and examine some of the salient issues, especially as they relate to the issue of objectivity. In examining the nature of history, it is very pertinent to define history itself. The word *history* has been given different definitions by different scholars especially the students of history. We shall examine some of the definitions of history. History has been adjudged to be the record of the past event but in a real sense it goes beyond that. E.H Car, (1961) expatiated that history in a general sense is the description and interpretation of past important activities of men. According to Geoffrey, a professor of History sees history, “*as the attempt to discover the basis of fragmentary evidence and significant events about the activities of man in the past*”. History in the broad sense is the totality of all past events, although a more realistic definition would limit it to the known past (Marwick, 1981).Of all the various human endeavours, history seems the hardest to define precisely because the attempt to uncover past events and formulate an intelligible account of men necessarily involves the use and influence of many auxiliary disciplines and literary forms. It must be stressed that the motive of historical study is to promote the currency of true ideas. The historians aim at finding out the truth and telling it (Dray, 1971).

A few inferences can be drawn from the above definitions. Firstly, history is seen as the past of human actions and in this sense, it studies men in relation to their social relationship. Since history is concerned with human actions in the past, the historian must rely on the present or available evidence of the past event, for a proper documentation of

the past action. Secondly, it is clear that the historian cannot fully capture the past in his writing, therefore, he selects from evidences at his disposal for historical record. Selection of evidence is therefore, an essential aspect of what a historian does. Thirdly, historians need not to be empathy in his work. Since one of the duties of the historian is to understand and tell the truth about the past, he needs a degree of non-empathy and imagination in his work (Joyce, 1982).

Having examined the nature of history, it is equally important to examine the possibilities of attaining objective history. Vansina (1965) asserted that by absolute objectivity, we mean a body of knowledge in which there is separation between the investigator and the object of investigation thereby making it possible for all investigators of the same object to arrive at the same conclusion.

Various studies have revealed that absolute objectivity is not attainable in historical writing. This is due to the fact that historians are faced with myriad of problems. Selection of historical data is one of the major problems confronting historians in writing objective history. Having considering the fact that historians cannot comprehensively document every record of the past event. Therefore, historian is forced to select from the available information and record to document past events, and as a result of this a personnel is usually involved (Oloruntimehin, 1976). It is true that every form of inquiry is selective. It is also true that selection which the historian makes is quite different from that of the scientist. The selection of the scientist may not influence the results of his investigation but on the other hand the historian's selection to a large extent determines the form of his account. This therefore makes absolute objectivity unattainable in historical writing.

Added to the problem of data selection is the problem of interpretation of historical data. Historian always searches for the truth about what happened in the past but the past is not open to direct inspection (Henige, 1982). The historians must study documents which are the evidences of the past and compare them with other sources. The

acceptability and reliability of every fact depends on the interpretation given to it by the historian. The inferences which the historian makes constitute an impediment to the attainment of absolute objectivity because the same historical fact may be given different interpretation by different historians.

Vansina (1965) further expatiated that historical methodology is another problem that hinders the attainment of absolute objectivity in historical writing. Scientists have evolved generally acceptable and regular ways of tackling scientific problems, and it would be unscientific these methods are not employed in solving scientific problems. In history, there is also a methodology which is not as rigid as that of science. There are no generally acceptable laws governing historical writing. As such, historians may not arrive at the same conclusions which all independent investigators will be ready to accept.

Alaoga (1976) opined that the freedom which historians exercise in the use of language may also hinder the attainment of objectivity. No language can be constructed as to make misunderstanding impossible. Even scientists cannot guarantee that everyone will have the same conception of the terms they employ. But the possibility of misunderstanding the language used appears to be higher in history compare to other disciplines. This richness of language which the historian employs in his account tends to allow misconception in his interpretation.

Hegel (1956) asserted that another problem that hinders the attainment of absolute objectivity in historical writing is the problem of cultural background and ideological inclination of the historian. The historian's membership of a particular religion, race, ethnic group, ideological group or cultural identity may cast doubt on his ability to achieve absolute objectivity.

Indeed, the above issues reveal that absolute objectivity is not attainable in history. Objectivity in history is different from that of other disciplines because of the divergence of data and interpretation

of data by the historian. Also the social world which the historian deals with is different from the physical world. Having examined the nature of history and problems of attaining objectivity in historical writing, we shall examine some of the theories on objectivity.

Theories on Objectivity in History

Ever since history started to be documented, historians have reflected on the theories and methods with which they approach the past, and the possibilities and limitations of acquiring reliable knowledge about them. Here are some of the theories on objectivity:

(1) The Sceptical Theory of Objectivity

The Sceptical theory of objectivity maintains that certain moral and meta-physical beliefs are behind different historical interpretations and these beliefs are not scientific in nature. This implies that historical thinking has sometime irreducibly subjective about it, which colour the understanding of the past. Therefore, this theory not only denies the possibility of objectivity in history but also implies that history is in the past resort not a branch of knowledge that can be understood without interpretation.

The criticism against this theory is that it has removed the distinction which historians often make between history and propaganda. The truth is that history can always be distinguished from propaganda. This is because history as a methodology which, if followed, results in the writing of an objective historical account which cannot be labelled as propaganda (White, 1978). On the other hand, where the historical methodology is ignored, the account which is produced faces a serious danger of being labelled as propaganda and hence is of no value.

(2) The Positivist Theory of Objectivity

The positivists believe that the attainment of absolute objectivity as it is attained in natural science is also attainable in history. They argued that, if the historians are given the same method of investigation used by scientists, what the scientists have achieved in the study of nature

could also be achieved in the study of the society (Berlin, 1960). For instance, some of the renowned positivists like Von Ranke, a philosopher and Augustus, a historian submitted that the task of historians is to show how the “*past was*”. The positivists contended that historians should be able to recognize facts, to master them and display them as they actually happened. To them, historians were not supposed to be judges of the past, but they should merely to present what happened in the past. They, however, insist that historians should make use of original sources and make proper documentation of the facts at their disposal.

Also, the theory emphasizes an important element in the writing of history which is the interpretation of historical data. A writer, who does not interpret, is not a historian but narrator or story teller. An historian must be meticulous in the interpretation of his historical fact. The historian must not only be concerned with narration aspect of the work but also a proper interpretation of his facts. This is what Robbert Smith calls the “*why and how*” aspect of history. Indeed, whether or not a fact is accepted a fact of history depends largely on the question of interpretation (Finley, 1965). Hence, the element of interpretation is involved in every facts of history. History cannot do away with interpretation as opined by proponent of positivist’s theory.

It is worthy to note that no single historian can fully put together every fact about the past. He can only put together facts which are at his disposal. In this case, his narrative may be considered incomplete. It is therefore possible to have different narratives of the same event as no two or three historians have equal access to the same set of evidence. Therefore, positivists’ theory is inapplicable to history.

(3) The Perspectivist Theory of Objectivity

The Perspectivist theory of objectivity holds the view that every historian considers the past from a particular stand point. It asserts that any history is a product of two factors namely: Subjective element of the historian i.e. his view point of the object, and 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 happened (Dray, 1971). The perspectivists disagree sharply with the positivists. The perspectivists contend that it is not enough for an historian to collect his materials and write them down as they occurred. For the perspectivists, therefore, the idea of interpretation does not negate objectivity.

The fact must be accepted that “no historian starts out with his mind blank, to be gradually filled by the evidence”. In other words, the historian always has a pre-conceived idea of his writing (Joyce, 1982). But the argument is that this needs not and in fact should not, unduly influence a reconstruction of the past event. The important point is that regardless of what the perspective of the historian is, he must allow himself to be led in his writing by the evidence at his disposal.

Based on this, the perspectivists contend that objectivity can be attained if the historian follows certain fundamental rules. Firstly, the historian must properly scrutinize his evidence. Secondly, he must only accept conclusion only where there is good evidence for him and thirdly, he must maintain intellectual integrity and honesty in his arguments and presentations. Therefore, for the perspectives, an historical account is subjective if it does not follow strict historical methodology.

Steps in Achieving Absolute Objectivity

Indeed, attempt has been made to make a credible explanation of objectivity in history. Among all the theories on objectivity examined, the perspectivists theory appeals to us because it appears to take cognizance of the nature of history as what history does. The best one can do is to provide an explanation of what it entails. In history, objectivity is not absolute. In fact, there is no absolute fact in history. The facts are determined by the significance the historian attaches to them (Marwick, 1981).

In interpreting historical facts, the historian must play down his sentiments and emotions. He must respect his evidences by not

suppressing or deliberately twisting them to suit any selfish purpose (Joyce, 1982). He should base his judgments on verified fact and strive to give the other side of account where such exist. He should avoid looking at the past event with the eyes of the present. Hegel, (1956) opined that an historian must demonstrate a high degree of intellectual integrity and honesty in his work. When an historian has followed these procedures, his account becomes objective. On the contrary, if he ignores them in his work, then his account may be considered subjective.

More importantly, it must be stressed that since the historian is a student of change, his conclusions just as in science, may not be valid at all time. In other words, objectivity in history may also be tentative in the sense that discovery of fresh evidence may affect historical reconstruction and therefore the result is a re-evaluation of a previous objective account. Considering this, it is crystal clear why each generation re-writes and re-interprets its history.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that an objective historical account should be based on deep research and investigation and should be able to stand the test of time. The concept of absolute objectivity is however neither applicable to history nor to science.

Conclusion

It has been shown from the foregoing that objectivity is useful in history to the extent that it serves as a methodological tool to prevent the historian from reflecting biases and prejudices in his account. It must also be reiterated that the primary concern of every historian is to provide understanding about the past. If this is to be achieved, then it is unnecessary to have universally acceptable conclusions in history. In fact, to have different views is better because it will be a step towards achieving the goal of history which is the understanding the past.

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