

Contemporary Historiography and Realism: The Postmodernist Question

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Abstract

One of the questions with post-modernism touches on the objectivity of historical inquiry and writing. Creating a framework from the thoughts of Johann Droysen and Michel Foucault within the context of historical truth, this article involves an overview of central philosophies and theories of history as a field of study in the humanities. It also considers key existing ideals on historical realism and then addresses this post-modernist question by evaluating the veracity of some of its positions, arguments and criticisms on language, culture, and metanarratives in its historical deconstructive approach.

Keywords: History, Historiography, Realism, Post-modernism, Humanities.

Introduction

History is humanity's knowledge of itself, its certainty about itself. It is not 'the light and the truth' but a search therefore, a sermon thereupon, a consecration thereto. It is like John the Baptist, 'not the light but sent to bear witness to that light. (Droysen, 1868: 144)

I am well aware that I have never written anything but fiction. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth. One 'fictions' history on the basis of ... reality that makes it true, [and] one 'fictions' ... [events or activities] not

yet in existence on the basis of historical truth. (Foucault, 1980: 193)

The above quotes indicate that the veracity of historical knowledge has been widely scrutinized on both philosophical and theoretical standpoints; while some, such as the positivist believe in the possibility of absolute correctness about the past; postmodernism, a recent ideological construct contends that history can never give an accurate account of the past. Collingwood seems to share a similar thought with the postmodernist when he asserted that "all History are histories of thought" (Carr, 1961, p. 11). On the other hand, Von Ranke's thoughts appears appealing to the positivists when he noted that "History is writing what actually happened" (Carr, 1961, p. 9). At this juncture, to properly analyse and interrogate the subject matter of historical truth in perspective of Johann Droysen's assertion, it is imperative to respond to certain questions which include, what is History? Is there any framework on which historical truth and certainty can be anchored and to what extent can history be objective within such framework? Then, what are the inhibitions to the attainment of historical truth? These outlined questions will guide and help the explanations in this discourse.

What is History?

History is a controversial concept; it has not gained a univocal definition among historians. The lack of agreement between historians on what history fundamentally stands for is not a different situation from the external conception of history. Taking stock of some will aid us arrive at a modest (mist) explanation of what history represents. E. H Carr conceived history as "a continuous process of interaction between the present and the past" (Carr, 1961, p. 30). The point here is that there exist an unbroken dialogue between the past and the present; therefore, history is an alive, active and progressive. Professor Geoffrey Barraclough sees history as "the attempt to study on the basis of fragmentary evidence the significant things about the past" (Barraclough, 1955, pp. 29-30). He believes and explains further that "the history we read, though based on facts ... not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgments" (Barraclough, p. 14). Arising from this is that, history is an engaging activity that relies on the scrutiny of accessible residues of the past

either in objects or traditions to project a view of the important past activities of mankind; in this way, its accuracy is controversial. In the words of Professor Erim O. Erim in his inaugural lecture on 12th November, 2004 at the University of Calabar, he noted that: "...history is an organized and critical study of such past activities of human beings as had produced sufficient effects on subsequent course of events or on other human beings in the course of events ... it is not just a study of the past, nor is it an uncritical cataloguing of significant past events, still it is a study of all past events. It is analytical and critical in the sense that the historian seeks to understand these significant past events and will interpret them in the light of his own knowledge of the present (Erim, 2004, p. 3).

This view of history creates a link of the past with the present; specifically, how the present knowledge of the historian shapes his analysis and interpretation of the past. Hence, it implies that every generation authors their own history; this is because, what a catalogue of historical narrative submits as truth in a generation might be flawed as fictions in a subsequent generation. Arthur Marwick in his writing on "The Nature of History" identified three dimensions from which history can be conceived; one, history is "the entire human past as it actually happened," on the other hand, history as inquiry- that is, what man is saying and writing about history (the past), better still, what man has recorded about the past, and three, that history is a rigorous and systematic study of the past; that is, a consideration of history as a discipline or academic field of study (Marwick, 1970). These perspectives by Marwick seem to provide an array where the various conceptualizations of History could be classified and understood. More recently, M.C. Lemon illustrates two fundamental branches of historical philosophy which he identified as speculative philosophy of history and analytical philosophy of history (Lemon, 2003). In his explanation, speculative history is a rigorous attempt to fashion meaning out of History by generating probing questions such as...does history demonstrate a single giant unfolding story? If so, does the 'story' have an ending? And is that ending utopian, cataclysmic, or simply mundane? Or does history go round in circles ('cycles')? ... Can we learn anything from the flow of history, or is every situation unique? (Lemon, 2003, p. 9). These questions among others have generated other broad thought provoking issue on the philosophy of history.

Is there such a thing as 'Fate'? Or 'Providence'? Has 'human nature' remained the same throughout history? Can we talk of different mentalities over the ages, such as an early 'mythical consciousness' as distinct from the modern 'scientific' outlook? Can the history of humanity be seen as analogous to the growth of the individual from infancy, through childhood and youth, to maturity, and then old age? Why is it that great cultures have invariably declined? (Lemon, p. 9)

From the questions the speculative thought poses, it reflects its focus on introspection, interest in insights and prediction of the future as well as an attempt on the pursuit of universal history. Secondly, the analytical philosophy of history aligns with historiography, which is the act of historical writing. It concerns itself with the idea, nature and methods of history as an academic field of study; hence it is preoccupied with such themes as objectivity, causation as well as theories for historical interpretation. The analytical perspective in its approach results in addressing such questions as ... what conditions must be met for a statement about the past to be 'true'. Is there an exclusively 'historical' way of explaining the past as distinct; ... from a scientific way? Is narrative a satisfactory vehicle for historical knowledge? Do historians implicitly rely on certain 'laws' of human behaviour in their understanding of history? If so, what are they, and are they valid? ... can the historian reach objective truth, or is he or she captive to subjective accounts? (Lemon, 2003, p. 9). The speculative and analytical philosophy of history seems to capture a wide range of controversial as well as reconcilable issues in philosophy of history and history as a discipline. However, history being humanities knowledge of itself is not out of place as humanity engage in enquiry and thoughts to gain knowledge about her past in order to lighten up the present and project a guide to the future. In this attempt, the issue of truth has been raised as to its realism in such investigations about human past. The point is that, is there anything like historical realism, and if there is how can it be attained?

Von Ranke and Historical Realism

The quest for and possibility of historical realism, otherwise historical truth or objective history is better discussed in Leopold Von Ranke's philosophy of history which tend to justify the exactness of historical

works (Ranke, 1973). Von Ranke- a celebrated German philosopher and historian of the nineteenth century was outstanding for his ideological and methodological shift from the traditional approach to the study of history which was largely subjective to the historian. What eventually became known as the professionalization of history with its attendant rigorous research methods and its development as an academic field of study was a product of the Rankean thought.

Ranke's approach to the study of history was anchored on his attempt to divulge the past just "simply to show how it was" without passing a judgement on it (Carr, 1961; Collingwood, 1994). Hence, the preoccupation of the historian is to access facts of history and present it the way it appears with all sense of trustworthiness. As Earnest Scott puts it, "the historian aims at finding out the truth and telling it" (Scott, 1925, pp. 26). To attain realism and ultimately universalism in history, Ranke down played interpretation of facts as it is a constituent problem to the attainment of scientific objectivity in history. In pursuit of this, the historian would need to engage the use of primary sources and proper documentation (Marwick, 1970). Further, should historical truth and objective history be attained, the historian should be dispassionate and critical in his approach to the study of the past; committed on their essential task of reconstruction. In addition "the historian needs not only merely standard knowledge of how people do behave in different situations, but also a conception of how they ought to behave" (Walsh, 1967, p.116). This standpoints of Ranke seems impracticable for historians, they appear as ivory towers of historicism.

The well-illustrated and exciting viewpoints that Ranke broaches are not without criticism. The reliance on the use of original sources and official documents prescribed by Ranke will make the study of history concentrate on political and military issues at the expense of social and economic matters which are not as much available in official records and primary documentations until recently. In the same way, Ranke's denouncement on the interpretation of facts is unacceptable to the essence of history, exfoliating interpretation from the craft of history is tantamount to holding breath from a suckling; it renders history parochial in its approach and explanation and also restricts the historians' task to mere story telling. In Carr's view, interpretation of fact is the core of the historian task from which he will be able to pass moral or value judgments on individuals and

events in history (Carr, 1961). To this end, Ranke's thesis on the pursuit and attainment of historical realism and its abounding criticism is an affront to the attainment of historical truth.

On this note, the position of Johann Droysen comes handy when he noted that: "history is not the light and truth". Relatively, however, history may not reflect the entirety of the past in exactness as in 'light and truth' but it is a symbolic representation of the existence of the human activities in the past and the attempt to unravel these past activities not just in exactness but in sensible and relevant forms and explanations has been the quest in historical investigations. In assonance with this discourse and to gain sufficient understanding of the status of truth and the search for it in history, it is imperative to consider the postmodernist thesis and how it concerns the issue of historical truth and objective history.

Postmodernist Historiography: The Question on Truth

Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and staunch postmodernist in the historical perspective once expressed his thought this way: "I am well aware that I have never written anything but fiction. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is, therefore, absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth" (Foucault, 1980, p. 193). This statement is a reflection of the postmodernist ideology which has staged up attacks on modern philosophies with particular confrontation on the existence of truth and values. Postmodernism as an ideological construct and movement has adopted the deconstructive approach against existential assumptions that touches issues of objectivity, realism, positivism, truth, absolutism, separatism, multiculturalism among others.

As it concerns history, postmodernism decries historical realism and the attainment of objective history which the positivist have idealized. The postmodernists claim that history is mere fiction and truth cannot be absolute because there are different patterns of thought, conception on issues and varying theories of historical interpretation; more importantly, the historian writes about the past within a self-conscious framework (Munslow, 1997). In the same way, postmodernism claims that language is not a perfect and impeccable medium of communication; that is, what it represents in a culture is different from what it means in other cultures. Hence,

postmodernist have deconstructed the use of language in history not to be considered as neutral, but it is inextricably bound up with the culture in which it is used (Lemon, 2003). On this note, it dispels the possibility of the veracity of historical knowledge.

Essentially, postmodernism historiography challenges 'metanarratives' which presents a universalistic view point of history. This is reflected in such ideals of historical interpretation like Marxism which postulates that societies operate within a system of production characterized by class struggle between the 'haves' and the 'haves not'. This will certainly not apply to all climes of the world as a model for interpreting the past. The Liberal-rational-humanist viewpoint is another 'metanarrative' which contends that the only means for societal progress is dependent on the accumulation of scientific knowledge for societal development not only for the sake of 'enlightenment' regarding 'truth' but also for its application to efficient economic production, 'just' government and administration, and harmonious social engineering (Lemon, 2003). Further, it contends against the traditional hegemonic approach to history that promotes one culture or group (ethnic, elite and gender) above the other. In this case, postmodernists disregard the divisions and hierarchical classifications between elite culture and academic culture (Cohen, 1999). This, in a way, points to the influence of personal biases of the historian on his work; his background, beliefs, gender, class and ideological persuasion cannot be divorced outright from his works. This goes a long way to question the realism of historical knowledge.

On the whole, postmodernists have challenged traditional historians for being static and inimical to progress, despite the changing nature in global ideal and the philosophy of history in particular. Jenkins - an ardent advocate of the postmodernist creed believes that traditional historians seem to be satisfied with the status quo because he thinks they study the past for its own sake without the purpose of hindsight and foresight (Jenkins, 1997). In the same way, the postmodernist philosophy has been largely criticized for its affront on the discipline of history, specifically its consideration of history as mere fiction which is obviously unacceptable. Traditional historians have criticized postmodernism for the ambiguity and inconsistency of its tenets which they claim will be inappropriate for the furtherance of historical understanding and that since it

disregards the existentiality of historical truth in totality which is the quest of historical research, it remains an impracticable construct in the concept and philosophy of history.

Postmodernism appears a passing thought, a counter reaction and revolutionary movement with no distinct purpose as history is concerned. As Shaikh puts it, "Postmodernity is a period of pessimism contrasting with modernity's optimism. Postmodernism is a counter enlightenment philosophy whereas modernism is a pro-enlightenment philosophy" (Shaikh, nd., p. 3). Therefore, the postmodernists' thought is a thesis that will generate antitheses, as it is now, and give way to another synthesis. In the historians view, it is just a figment that has come to share in the process of development and its incoherence and inapplicability to history specifically will suffer it a natural death. Be that as it may, postmodernism has stood against the pursuit and possibility of truth in historical knowledge. It is however necessary to assert that history, historiography and historians have come in terms with the inherent controversies and limitations to historical objectivity and truth, but the task has hitherto been to pursue the attainment of truth through rigorous inquiry, while it is well understood that scientific objectivity is far from such outcomes. Hence, history is an unending quest for the knowledge of human past with no one having the final say- it is *a search therefore and a sermon thereupon*.

Conclusion

The question on historical realism seems the central theme of *Johann Droysen's* assertion: "history is humanity's knowledge of itself, its certainty about itself. It is not 'the light and the truth' but a search, therefore, a sermon thereupon, a consecration thereto" (Droysen, 1868, p. 144). The historian in his task seeks to unearth the significant past of mankind to advance the knowledge about the past; in this process he makes value of available evidences/facts in his construction of the past in the present. The point here is that certain important evidences that could aid a perfect outlook of the past he seeks to unravel might not be available or accessible, this will erode the 'light and truth' he desires to attain. On the other hand, the possibility of his sincerity to divorce himself (the historians' biases) from his work is another issue that questions the realism of historical knowledge. While the positivists have glossed over these

foundational challenges to contend for the possibility of historical precision which they claim is achievable without tricking with facts, that is, manipulating and trying to interpret it; this according to them generates discrepancies on a particular event. The oppositions to this thought were substantial holds on the imperativeness of interpretation and moral judgment in history rendering it impracticable for purpose of history. In the midst of this philosophical convolution arose the overwhelming postmodernist perspective to history, questioning the fragile concept of truth and value in history with the aim of deconstructing the whole idea of historical objectivity as well as announcing history as fiction and probably nailing it. This have stimulated historians to counter postmodernism, justify the study of history and reiterate the concept of truth and value in history. The bottom line is, history is a witness and reflection of the past just like the biblical John the Baptist who was not the 'light' but a witness of the 'light'. By the same token, history is a continuous engagement for a more profound understanding of the past; by this, it is a progressive search without an ultimate end, bequeathed to the historian.

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