

Introduction to History, HS3.201

Mid Semester Exam

Date-22/09/2025

Grading Rubric

Max Time: 90 Minutes

Maximum Marks: 30 (10x3)

Instruction: Answer **any three** of the following four questions in approximately 500 words each.

Q1) What do you understand by ‘post-truth’ history and why does it pose a threat to the discipline of history specifically in our current shared reality? Using an example, demonstrate the workings of post-truth history at play.

Answer Rubric:

Part 1: What do you understand by ‘post-truth’ history and why does it pose a threat to the discipline of history specifically in our current shared reality? (7)

- Post-truth declared as Word of the Year by the Oxford Dictionary in 2016:

Definition as per the dictionary: *"A situation where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."* — (1)

- **Immediate context** for the surge in the usage of the word: 1) The word gained currency in the context of two ‘events’ that took place in 2016. 1) The election of Donald Trump to the American Presidentship in 2016 and the fraught, polarising campaign that brought him to power that year where facts no longer seemed to matter and the campaign was driven mostly on blatant misinformation, Manipulation and rhetoric to sway public opinion 2) Brexit, or the exit of the UK from the European Union, which was finalised through a referendum that also came on the backs of a massive populist campaign based lies and anti-immigrant propaganda. — (1) for either mention

- It has three defining characteristics:

i) *indifference to historicity*: An account of the past that not only pays scant regard to the established methodology of the discipline of history but has specific disdain for it. No attempt is made to prove the historical authenticity of any statement about the past by following a particular line of argumentation and referring to both primary and secondary sources that support that argument. — (1)

ii) *Appeal to emotion and personal belief*: Instead, post-truth history only seeks to appeal to people’s basal instincts and emotions. Its aim is to support an already commonly held (usually problematic and divisive) opinion by simply asserting it with conviction and fervour.

iii) *ideological motivation*: The commonly held opinion that post-truth history espouses is governed by ideology and is in service of specific political projects. — (1)

- Post-truth history has gained currency in the recent years, the practice of using the past for propagating specific political agendas and projects and for controlling the narrative about certain events, historical periods and communities is not a new thing. It has been resorted to by totalitarian regimes both on the Right (Nazism, Fascism) and the Left (the former USSR and Communist China) to disastrous and tragic ends. — (1)

However, it **poses a specifically more potent threat to the discipline of history in the present for two reasons:** 1) the availability of technology that facilitated the dissemination of post-truth history at unprecedented speed and scale. — (1) 2) A global political and cultural climate that is particularly scornful and dismissive of expertise and authority so that academic historians and their scholarship has lost considerable weight among people who are most susceptible to the claims made by post-truth history. — (1)

Part II: Example of post-truth history at play (3)

For this part of the question see the examples given on pages 9-13 of the book *History in a Post-Truth World* (the prescribed reading for this topic). The introduction of the book gives two examples of post-truth history – the fake death camp in Warsaw and the meme about Irish slaves in the United States. It's fine if either of these examples have been used. It is also okay if an example other than these two are used. However, for both cases (i.e. examples from the book as well as other ones) what is important that it is explained clearly why the example qualifies as post-truth history by showing that it does not have regard for historicity, appeals to emotion and personal belief and is ideologically motivated.

Q2) How did the understanding of and engagement with the concept of time develop and evolve from Antiquity to Enlightenment?

Answer rubric

0.5 FOR EACH POINT

Antiquity:

- For the ancient Greeks the Mycenaean Civilization which preceded it was seen as the 'Golden Age' of gods and heroes. The folk memory of this glorious past was preserved first orally preserved and passed on ultimately culminating in the epics of Homer. Since the pinnacle of civilization had already been reached, the Greeks thought of history and time only as a decline from this ideal state
- Hence for the Greeks, time was not a god since its passage is not something provides hope or comfort but only a realizing of impending mortality.
- Homer and Hesiod in their works presented two contrasting views on time: The former was more interested in the idea of space rather than time. He was not interested in depicting the passage of time by tracing the origins and ends of things. Hesiod, on the other hand was more aware of time and temporality. He wrote about the fall from the Mycenaean golden age and of the passage of time in the rhythm of daily life.
- Greek philosophers presented their own views on time in their writings.
Example: Heraclitus' thesis on change: The world is always in a state of change and transformation ("You cannot step twice into the same river"). Also believed that there is always a strife of opposites (hot and cold, wet and dry etc). Both change and conflict are needed to maintain order and balance rather than being chaos inducing.
- The idea of time as a judge: Time will always discover and avenge any act of injustice.

Middle Ages:

- At the end of the Roman Empire, Christianity emerged victorious from among all the other religions that had existed alongside it to become the predominant organising religion of the Western world.
- With the ascent of Christianity time became historical and linear, moving in one direction rather than cyclical. The birth of Christ – the singular most important event for the faith – divided time into two ages
- Early Middle Ages – All time was God's time and people's lives governed by the rhythms of the church (embodied in the church bells and their tolling) – This was what Jacques Le Goff has called 'church time'. Towards the later Middle Ages Church time came to be increasingly

challenged by the 'merchant time' which was based on the incipient idea that time can be measured and the way it is spent hold meaning beyond the religious lives of the people – A gradual secularisation of time.

Renaissance:

The invention of the mechanical clock: Has a huge social significance.

The adoption of the uniform hour of sixty minutes

Replaced the day as the fundamental unit of labour

The understanding of time as something valuable

The invention of the domestic clock and watches: A constant reminder of the passage of time even in one's personal space.

This new attitude steeped into the arts. Patrons of arts and building projects now demanded commissioned works finish within a time frame as opposed to the Middle Ages when they could take decades. To cope with this new, more efficient techniques were invented and adopted (example – painting a secco i.e on dry plaster rather than al fresco which was done on wet plaster)

Overall, a pessimistic outlook on the passage of time. It was believed that human civilization has already reached its peak during the Greco-Roman Antiquity and hence is only hurtling towards an inevitable decline from there on. The Renaissance was hence an attempt to revive that golden age so as to halt this downward spiral

Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment:

- more optimistic, forward-looking outlook towards time

- Powered by the Scientific Revolution and the advances made in science and technology- facilitated a better understanding of the natural and physical world which in turn inspired more confidence in mankind's ability to control it.

- This led to the rejection of the idea of all knowledge to be enshrined in Antiquity

- Powered by rationality which prompted the belief that the world was not getting worse and it was not hurtling towards an inevitable end but was in fact moving in a positive direction towards bigger and better things.

Q3) Why are conventionally trained historians dismissive and scornful of counterfactual history and how do the new pro-counterfactualists defend its usefulness? Based on your viewing of the documentary *Virtual JFK*, discuss the features of good counterfactual history.

Answer rubric

Part 1.1: Why are conventionally trained historians dismissive and scornful of counterfactual (2)

- **No sources:** Professional historians have scorned counterfactual history because they largely see it as a kind of thinking about the past that is free of evidence. Since counterfactuals are about the 'what ifs' of history, there are no sources to help write them and since 'sources' are the cornerstone of the discipline, many historians see no merit in indulging in an exercise that is based on 'nothing' — (1)

- **Wars and 'great men' approach:** The other reservation that historians have from counterfactual history is that it almost always is alternative scenarios involving wars (had they ended differently than they did) or people (what if some historical figure was not born at all or was not assassinated etc). Such an approach, according to many historians places too much emphasis on specific 'events' and 'people' and their role in altering the course of history while the study of the past, as the discipline intends it to be, is more about looking deeper into

structural causes and complicated social and cultural process as factors shaping the past as we know it. — (1)

Part 1.2: How do the new pro-counterfactualists defend its usefulness? (3)

Despite these reservations there has emerged over the years a reasonably strong defence by the new pro-counterfactualists of the usefulness of counterfactual history:

- 1) **It can be a healthy exercise for historians to reflect on their motives and methods:** The writing of history itself involves a careful process of selection and curation. ‘What-ifs’ are inherent in this process but as an implicit exercise. Counterfactual history just makes it more explicit. — (1)
- 2) **It encourages a more nuanced understanding of the contingent nature of history:** So many things that have happened in history that we take for granted could very well have gone a different way. This is what counterfactual history shows. An awareness of this can help build empathy and diminish sentiments of excessive national (or any other collective belonging) pride and narratives of cultural and racial exceptionalism. — (1)
- 3) **It makes the past and its study more accessible and engaging:** Counterfactual thinking is something that we partake in all the time in our actual lives and hence when it is applied to historical analysis it makes the past more approachable and interesting for people who might be daunted by it as an intellectual and academic discipline and hence more receptive to studying it. — (1)

Part 2: Based on your viewing of the documentary *Virtual JFK*, discuss the features of good counterfactual history. (5)

For this part of the answer, the following characteristics of a well done counterfactual need to be discussed in connection with the film:

- Should have some plausibility: The scenario that is the theme of the counterfactual history should have a real possibility of actually taking place. (Does the film do that?) — (1)
- The ‘minimal rewrite’ rule: It should change on more than one thing from the actual historical timeline. (what is the film ‘re-writing?’) — (1)
- Should be based on what is actually known: It should not indulge in entirely fantastical scenarios. The setting, the time, the people involved should be the same as those in the actual historical record. (how is this established in the film) — (1)
- A scenario that contemporaries had also contemplated: There should be evidence that the alternative scenario of the counterfactual is something that those who lived at the time had also seen as a possibility and that there are sources that indicate so. (what material does the film use ?) — (1)

Q4) What are the main objections that have been raised about the usefulness of equating history with science and how have they been countered by E.H. Carr?

- 1) **Objection 1:** History deals with the ‘unique’ science with the ‘general’

Carr’s Counterargument: Carr’s counters this objection by pointing out that science is not as ‘universal; and ‘general’ as is commonly assumed. It is replete with specificities and diversity. For example, no two species are the same, there are numerous and diverse geological formations etc. At the same time history is also not only about the ‘specific’ and the unique. It tends to generalize all the time (examples: periodization of historical periods, terms like ‘wars’ ‘revolutions etc are generalizing

ones and yet no two wars or revolutions in history are similar). History is concerned with the relationship between the unique and the general. (2)

2) **Objection 2:** History teaches no lessons

Carr's counterargument: The practice of generalization in history is primarily so that lessons can be learnt from it. According to Carr, we “. . . learn about the present in the light of the past and learn about the past in the light of the present.” The writing of history, in that sense is not a one-directional process but one where the past and the present are continuously informing each other to arrive at a better understanding of human development. (2)

3) **Objection 3:** History, unlike science is unable to predict

Carr's counterargument: Science itself is no longer obsessed with being able to pronounce universal laws that hold true across time and space. Science and its laws, according to Carr are merely statements of tendencies of what might take place given certain conditions remain stable and equal. At the same time, the historian based on the generalizations they tend to facilitate by observing patterns across several unique occurrences should be able to provide a guide for future even though they might not be able to predict what might exactly happen in the future. (**Note:** a very good answer should be able to cite an example demonstrating this. Some examples are provided by Carr in the book itself and there was the example of the Pandemic that I used in class to explain this point) (2)

4) **Objection 4:** History is subjective while science is objective

Carr's counterargument: According to Carr, the original sharp distinction drawn between the observer and the observed in science itself is no longer as rigid. It sees possibilities if deconstructing this binary between the subject and the object so as to create room for seeing interrelation and interdependence between them. In that sense science in its development is much closer to history which constantly dwells on interconnections, pattern, context and interdependence between that those who are studying the past and those who are being studied. (2)

5) **Objection 5:** History concerns itself with questions related to religion and morality

Carr's counterargument:

Religion: Just like a scientist can believe in God and yet seek to rationally find answers to the mysteries of the universe, a serious historian can also have faith in some kind of God that gives meaning to the course of human history while still trying to explain causality as a complex thing and not merely as the will of God.

Morality: It is not the task of the historian to pass moral judgements on the private lives of the characters of the past they are writing about if it they have no bearing on the historical events/periods/processes they are studying. However, the historian can and should judge institutions, policies etc. (2)