

## Handout 1: What is History?

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### Objectives of the Class:

To familiarize students with the concept of history.

To develop a perspective regarding historiography.

### Questions to be addressed:

- What is history?
  - What is historiography?
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- **What is history?**

The following were the responses received in class answer to the above question.

1. The understanding of past based on evidence.
2. How do we understand the past?

We will be covering three historians views:

1. R.G. Collingwood
2. E.H. Carr
3. Geoffrey Elton

The first view of history represents what was called the empiricist, positivist view of history. This was the view of history held by historians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. English historian E.H. Carr, author of *What is History?* also notes that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, historians held to an empirical, positivist worldview that revolved around a "cult of facts", viewing historical facts as information that simply had to be assembled to produce an objective picture of the past that was entirely accurate and independent of any human opinion.[Carr 1987, pp7-11]

However, Carr considers this view of history to be inherently flawed as according to him, the

historian arbitrarily determines which of the 'facts of the past' should turn into historical facts based on her own biases and agendas. He writes-

*"The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate."*[Carr, p 12]

Carr divides facts into two categories-

- i. Fact of the past, i.e., historical information that the historian deemed to be unimportant.
- ii. Historical facts, i.e., information that the historians have decided to be important.

Carr's this contention brings us to the second answer given by one of the students- "History is how do we understand the past." So history is not just what 'happened' in the past, but also about how we understand what happened in the past. This speaks of the relationship between fact and its interpretation. So history may be dependent on - 1. Selection of a fact as a historical fact, 2. Interpretation of the historical fact. Thus it may be contended that history can never be objective completely, but it is inherently subjective.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, non-empirical historians argued on similar lines. Carr refers to this group of historians. They said that it was impossible to write an objective history, because all historical facts were themselves subjective. Although sharing their general view, he criticizes the approach adopted by one of these non-empiricists, **R. G. Collingwood**, for proposing that any one interpretation of history was as good as any other.

**Carr contends that history should neither be 'an objective compilation of facts', nor 'the subjective product of the mind of the historian.'** [Carr, p. 29] He suggests a middle path, **constituted by an ongoing interaction between the historian and the evidence.**

He remarks that **the historian continuously moulds his facts to suit their interpretation and their interpretation to suit their facts, and takes part in a dialogue between past and present.**[Carr, pp. 29-30] Summing up his argument, Carr puts forward his own answer to the question of "what is history?", remarking that **"it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the past and the present."**[Carr, p. 30]

Carr further says that every individual is a 'social phenomenon', and is heavily influenced by the society around. As individuals, historians too are influenced by the 'society around them', and it is this societal influence that influences the historians' interpretations of the past.

This brings us closer to the third definition given by one of the students- that history is what constitutes the present. However, what Carr contends is that the present is what goes into the 'making of the past as we understand it.' The point is that we come to the contention that while constructing history, the historian is faced with an interaction between the past and the present. The present influences the past, and the past shapes the present.

(Even though saying that the historian is heavily influenced by the social environment, Carr leaves room for historian to make decisions that affect history. However, this is a narrow space.)

The interaction between past and the present brings us to what is called **Causation in History**.

Carr talks about causation in history. This implies that everything that happened in this world happened because of cause and effect. He holds on to a **deterministic** outlook in history. This is based on the belief that events could not have happened differently unless there was a different cause.

He said, "These so called accounts in history represent a sequence of cause and effect interrupting and so to speak clashing with the Sequence of which the historian is primarily concerned to investigate." [Carr, p 129] He feels that the main job of a historian is to investigate the reasons/causes as to why events occurred **and not to create the events or justify them**.

Again, in this scheme, he sees no room for accidents in history, nothing is a chance happening; as there is rational cause to everything that is happening.

Carr claimed that when examining causation in history, historians should seek to find "rational" causes of historical occurrences, **that is causes that can be generalized across time to explain other occurrences in other times and places**. For Carr, historical "accidents" cannot be generalized, and are thus not worth the historian's time. Carr argued that historians needed to find the "real" causes of historical events by finding the general trend **which could inspire a better understanding of the present** than by focusing on the role of the accidental and incidental. [Carr, pp. 107-108]

In this way, Carr sets the objective of history to be 'to foster a better understanding of the present'. The implicit assumption is that the present can be understood by studying the past because the present is a result of a sequence of happenings from the past to the present. Regarding future, he conceded that historians cannot predict exact events in the future. Nevertheless, he argued that historical generalizations can supply information useful to understanding both the present and the future.

The key conception of history, according to Collingwood, is the re-enactment of the past in the living present. Thus, simply remembering is not history. Only when memories are used as evidence and testimonies are reasoned out to draw conclusions, we are engaged in re-enacting our lives historically. History takes place in the present. Only in the present can it be alive. [R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*]

Carr's opinions about the nature of historical work in *What Is History?* were controversial. In his 1967 book *The Practice of History*, Sir Geoffrey Elton criticized Carr for his "whimsical" distinction between the "historical facts" and the "facts of the past", saying that it reflected "...an extraordinarily arrogant attitude both to the past and to the place of the historian studying it".[Elton, Geoffrey *The Practice of History*, London: Methuen, 1967 pp. 56–57]. Elton praised Carr for rejecting the role of "accidents" in history.

British philosopher W.H. Walsh said Carr was correct that historians did not stand above history, and were instead products of their own places and times, which in turn decided what "facts of the past" they determined into "facts of history".[ Walsh, W. H. (1963). "Review of *What Is History?*". *The English Historical Review*. 78 (308): 587–588.]

**Elton [Source: Schinkel, Anders. (June 2006). The Object of History. *Essays in Philosophy*, Vol. 7, Issue 2]**

Elton devotes the first part of *The Practice of History* to a discussion of the purpose of history. It is here that we find his clearest statements on 'the object of history'. The first statement of interest regarding object is the following:

"The study of history comprehends everything that men have said, thought, done or suffered. That much is commonplace, but also not quite true; some reservations have to be made. In the first place, not all the past is recoverable (...). (...) Historical

study is not the study of the past but ***the study of present traces of the past*** (...)."33

Here, Elton makes his first approach to object: 'everything that men have said, thought, done or suffered'. In his qualification of this statement, however, he confuses object with the sources – thus misinterpreting the question: "What does the historian study?" The study of history uses ***sources***; in one sense of the word, it studies them. But they are not what the study of history is concerned with; they are not what it is about. We might say that we are looking for the ***intentional object*** of the study of history – and that is not in principle limited by the scarcity of sources, though they may block the study of this object in practice.

Elton's mistake does not carry over to all the rest of his discussion. He continues as follows:

"Secondly, the definition given is in a way too wide because history is not the only form of enquiry which deals with man's past life. All the so-called social sciences (...) attend to man, and all of them can concern themselves with his past as well as his present. (...) We must therefore ask how history differs from other studies of man (...). The answer lies in three habits peculiar to history: ***its concern with events, its concern with change, and its concern with the particular.***"34

So, what object is, is qualified by this statement, that history (as a science) is concerned with events, change, and the particular. Elton elaborates this point:

***"History deals in events, not states; it investigates things that happen and not things that are."***35 The historian, "if he is to understand historically and practise historical writing", "will have to concentrate on understanding change, which is the essential content of historical analysis and description."36 "History treats fundamentally of the transformation of things (people, institutions, ideas, and so on) from one state into another, and the event is its concern as well as its instrument."37

For Elton, object1 is basically everything relating to man, seen as part of a process (or processes) of change, of transformation. The object of study is not something static, but something that is in flux. Hence, returning to his first statement of what the study of history is concerned with, Elton says:

"We can now rephrase the earlier definition of history. It is concerned with all

those human sayings, thoughts, deeds and sufferings which occurred in the past and have left present deposit; and it deals with them from the point of view of happening, change, and the particular.”<sup>38</sup>

Elton is also thinking of the possibility of the abuse of history for political purposes, for example in the form of propaganda. In his view, such abuse can only occur if the historian did not do his job (as historian) well. The intrinsic goal of the study of history is to acquire as adequate an understanding of the past, and to give as faithful a representation of the past, as the evidence allows. The latter is what it means to write good history. Against Carr, who emphasizes the dialogue between the present and the past, Elton says:

“The task of history is to understand the past, and if the past is to be understood it must be given full respect in its own right. And unless it is properly understood, any use of it in the present must be suspect and can be dangerous.”<sup>46</sup>

Once more Elton emphasizes that object is to understand the past, which implies **value-neutrality**. *The historian is only concerned with the present “in so far as it throws light on the part of the past he is studying. It is the cardinal error to reverse this process and study the past for the light it throws on the present.”*<sup>47</sup>

Elton’s final statement on the purpose of history is the following:

“Its real value as a social activity lies in the training it provides, the standards it sets, in this singularly human concern. Reason distinguishes man from the rest of creation, and the study of history justifies itself in so far as it assists reason to work and improve itself. Like all rational activities, the study of history, regarded as an autonomous enterprise, contributes to the improvement of man, and it does so by seeking the truth within the confines of its particular province, which happens to be the rational reconstruction of the past.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Carr and Elton compared**

The difference centres around the concept of ‘objectivity’.

For Carr, ‘objectivity’ is not the same everywhere and always. Instead, it depends on a relation to a subject:

"The facts speak 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."

Carr states clearly that "the social sciences as a whole, since they involve man as both subject and object, (...) are incompatible with any theory of knowledge which pronounces a rigid divorce between subject and object."

Though it is certainly not the historian's job to pronounce moral judgement on people from the past, it is inevitable that moral judgement is inherent in what the historian writes.

Objectivity, for Carr, can only lie in the historian's understanding of his necessary lack of it. The more objective historian is the one who understands himself as a partner in a dialogue between present and past, "the historian who penetrates most deeply into this reciprocal process".

Elton could not disagree more. For him, objectivity means neutrality. This means, first of all, that the historian should not pronounce moral judgment on the past. It means, secondly, that the historian should refrain from making any statement on the overall purpose or pattern of the past – it is beyond his competence to know this.

Elton discusses the idea that history is a less 'hard' science than the natural sciences, due to the fact that *in history, there is no equivalent for the repeatable experiment, and thus no possibility of verification or falsification by such means. His reply is that this gives history a greater objectivity, in the sense that whereas natural scientists construct (in their laboratories) the reality they study, historians have to conform to an objective, unalterable reality, that they did not construct.*

Indeed, "[t]he historian cannot verify; he can only discover and explain".

After he has made his initial choice of his area of study, "he becomes the servant of his evidence" and "opens his mind to the evidence both passively (listening) and actively (asking)".

The questions the mind comes up with are "suggested by the evidence". The 'proper practice of scholarship and research' drastically reduce the effect of the historian's lack of knowledge, subjectivity, and fallibility; his method "reduces the effects of human frailty and **creates a formidable foundation of certainty** beneath the errors and disputes which will never cease".

It is exactly because Elton has this very different idea of objectivity than Carr has, that he can

come up with his idea of 'the improvement of man'. This is not inconsistent with what Elton takes to be the proper historical attitude; on the contrary, both for the writing of history and for the improvement of man there are universal, objective criteria. ***Behind Elton's work is an idea of a fixed, universal truth – a truth about man and a truth about history. His position is in this respect diametrically opposed to Carr's.***



- **What is historiography?**

The study of the way history has been and is written – the history of historical writing... When you study 'historiography' you do not study the events of the past directly, but the changing interpretations of those events in the works of individual historians.

Thus historiography is writing *about* and not *of* history.

The Historiography is the meta-level analysis of the descriptions of the past. The analysis usually focuses on the narrative, interpretations, worldview, use of evidence, or method of presentation of other historians. The term can also be used of a body of historical writing, for example "medieval historiography." Historiographies can be described as falling into one of three categories:

1. approaches that understand history as random; hence, there is no purpose behind history—although the human race can take control of history to ensure a better future.
2. understandings of history that regards history either as a product of human evolution or of dialectical processes.
3. an understanding of history that accepts the reality of a divine power in whose hands human destiny and therefore the historical process itself finally resides. This view is usually associated with religious convictions. This approach tends to regard history from a purely secular perspective as inadequate, since historians who fail to recognize the reality of divine intervention cannot render a true account of history. For example, a secular account of history would not explain someone's victory in terms of God aiding them or the victory of an evil person in terms of a satanic attempt to disrupt God's purposes. For their part, secular historians regard such an approach as unscientific, arguing that it rests on subjective judgments not on empirically provable facts.

### **Basic issues studied in historiography**

Some of the basic questions considered in historiography are:

- Who wrote the source (primary or secondary)?
- For primary sources, we look at the person in his or her society, for secondary sources, we

consider the theoretical orientation of the approach for example, Marxist or Annales School, ("total history"), political history, etc (see below).

- What are the authenticity, authority, bias/interest, and intelligibility of the source?
- What was the view of history when the source was written?
- Was history supposed to provide moral lessons?
- What or who was the intended audience?
- What sources were privileged or ignored in the narrative?
- By what method was the evidence compiled?
- In what historical context was the work of history itself written?

**Food for Thought:**

Descartes defined "man's position as a being who can not only think, but think about his own thinking, who can observe himself in the act of observing, so that man is simultaneously the subject and the object of thought and observation."<sup>[16]</sup>