

The individual, society and history

IHS History: Lecture 2

The individual and society in history

- What came first: the individual or the society? Inseparable
- Complementary not opposites
- The interdependence grows with growing complexity
- But it is always a two-way process

Donne Every human born
in a society,
no man is an
island, entire
of itself. Society from
Everyman is a piece
of the continent, a part
of the main years

Language +
Environment
decide
character of
thought

J.S. Mill
men are not, when
brought together,
converted to any
other substance

Suicide is the
only free act
open to individual man,
every other act involves in one
way or another his
membership of society.

man who had only been conscious of himself as a member of a race/
party/family/corporation now saw

The cult of individualism

tremself as a spiritual individual.

Primitive man less individual, more completely moulded by society than civilized.

As their society provided much less diversity of individual skills/occupations than complex societies.

- Origins traced to the Renaissance
- Later connected with the rise of capitalism and Protestantism
- Formed the basis of the philosophy of 'Utilitarianism'
- Did not necessarily imply a revolt of individuals against society

French revolution: rights of man/citizen were rights of individual. Morely's compromises, individualism and utilitarianism - religion of human happiness & well being. Rugged individualism =

keynote of human progress.

Social revolution, early stage capitalism → production / dist.
in hands of individuals → stressed individual initiative.

→ Dangerous to say ability of modern society to mould character / thought of individual members & to produce uniformity among them less than tribal society.

The discipline of history and the cult of individualism

- Common sense view of history
- History is written by individuals about individuals
- Is this too simplistic a view of history?
- Knowledge of the historian not his individual possession
- The subjects of their histories are not isolated individuals

men of generations accumulated knowledge, not individual possession of historian people being act in a vacuum, acted in context/impulse of past Society.

view taken & encouraged by 19th
century liberal historians.

The historian and/in the march of history

Historian is a social phenomenon ←

- Both the product and spokesman of his society

- A part of the procession of history

Historian also part of procession

- Their positionality determines their angle of vision of the past

Relative parts of
procession

- May change his position along the way

new ones keep
occurring,
historian
simply part
of it.

constantly
changing, so
(or say near
Dark Ages)
Caesars etc.

① 1907: Confidently see German ideals in Bismarckian Reich, identify nationalism with universalism

The historian and historiographical trends

Meinecke example of historian where rapid changes of society & social order reflected in writings.

② 1925: Divided mind of Weimar Republic

- 19th century: history as progress
- Post WW1: from a cyclical theory of history to one in which history displays no patterns at all
- “Before you study history, study the historian.” Since 1914
- “Before you study the historian, study his historical and social environment”

Can't understand or appreciate work of historian unless you grasp the standpoint from which he approached it.

③ 1936: Cry of despair, acad honors swept by Nazi flood, rejected historicism which said ‘whatever is right is right’

Grote, Mommsen, Trevelyan, Namier all cast to speak in a single socialist political mould.

rooted in social & historical background

④ 1946: Belief in history at the mercy of blind, inexorable chance

Prof Butterfield while criticizing Whig interpretation of history:
Study of past with one eye on present is source of
all sins/sophistries in history. (Unhistorical?)

After war: Whig interpretation = English interpretation
Enthusiastically spoke of Englishman's alliance b/w present &
past.

One example of how work of historian mirrors society they live in.

Acton: History must be our deliverer from undue influence of
both other times & our own, from tyranny of environment
& air we breathe.

↳ historian conscious of own situation
also more capable of transcending it.

Bad King John Theory: what matters in history is character and behaviour of individuals → plausible when society simple, run by few known individuals.

Understanding the object/s of the historian's enquiry

- The behaviour of individuals?
- The action of social forces?

C.H. Carr reserves word process' of history to refer to inquiry into post of man in society.

Suggests historical events not determined by conscious individuals but by some all powerful force. See Marx

History has no owner wealth fights no battles. It is = immense wealth who does everything, red living man who possesses & fights their actions.

Miss Wedgwood

Behavior of men as individuals more interesting than their behaviour as groups or classes.

2 implications:

- ① Study of behaviour of man as individuals diff. from behavior as members of groups and historian can legitimately dwell on one over other
- ② Study of men as individuals = Study of conscious motives of

Great man is an individual.
Being an outstanding individual is also by
a social phenomenon of outstanding importance.

2 thoughts - Numbers matter in history.
by E.H. Carr - Defies evidence to suggest
history can be written on
the basis of
explanations in terms of
human intentions

The great men theory of history

Marx: Class war in France created circumstances & explanations in terms of
relations which enabled a great mediocrity

to strut about in a hero's garb

- Is history the stuff of individual genius and follies?
- Is the theory essentially escapist?

Can the behaviour of men as individuals be separated from their
behaviour as members of groups?

Disagrees
with

- How do we understand the rebels and dissidents in history?
these
- Do 'great men' lie outside history?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ky-MKuwaKEo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp2k7m5fej4&t=226s>

Facts of history about
relationships of individuals
to one another in
society &
about social
forces which
produce from
actions of individuals,
results often at variance
with/ opposite to
the results they
themselves
intended.