

# APPROACHING THE QUESTION OF FACTS IN HISTORY

IHS: History

Lecture I

Prof Sir George  
Clark (60 yrs  
later)

Positive belief, clear-eyed  
self-confidence of Victorian  
age.

- No 'ultimate  
history' even  
now

- work to be  
superceded  
again

- Past knowledge

Come from,  
altered by human minds

- Can't have  
interpersonal atoms

- No objective  
historical truth

## WHY WE STUDY HISTORY?

- The past teaches us about the present
- It builds empathy
- It can be intensely personal
- It can feel like completing a puzzle or solving a mystery
- Everything has a history!

Acton

- Unique recording opportunity
- Way useful to maximum
- Knowledge from 19th Century
- Can't have ultimate history
- Show point reached
- All info in reach
- every problem has solution

Bewilderment, distracted scepticism  
of the Beat generation.

## THE QUEST OF HISTORIANS: WHAT HAPPENED IN THE PAST?

- Is there such a thing as historical truth?
- How can we get to it?
- Would a time machine help?
- Would a video recording help?

Answer to (what is history?)  
reflects our own position  
in time.

History = corpus of facts  
Historian takes these & Serves  
how it appears to them

19th century, facts were popular

## POSITIVIST VIEW OF HISTORY

Derived from three traditions:

- 1) August Comte's positivist philosophy From science comes foresight, from foresight comes action.
- 2) The British empiricist tradition
- 3) The Rankian tradition → show how it really is → task of historian

Together they form E.H. Carr's 'Common Sense View of History'



Fact = datum of experience  
distinct from consciousness

(as per Oxford Shorter English Dictionary)

First ascertain facts,  
then draw conclusions  
from them.

## AUGUST COMTE AND POSITIVIST PHILOSOPHY

- Laced by a universalism espoused by the Enlightenment tradition
- Advocated the formulation of universal laws
- Three stages through which all human knowledge progressively passes:
  - 1) The theological or the fictitious
  - 2) Metaphysical or abstract
  - 3) Scientific or positive (the age of science and knowledge)
- Knowledge is generated through observation and experience
- Not interested in individual facts but in general laws
- These general laws can be derived through the method of induction

Advocated general  
universal laws  
through induction  
rather than  
individual facts.

# THE EMPIRICIST TRADITION

Complete separation between  
Subject & Object

- Knowledge is based on experience
- The primacy of senses as the source of knowledge
- Only legitimate form of knowledge is that whose truth can be verified
- Discounts knowledge based on tradition, belief, abstraction or imagination

Locke, Russell  
Dominant strain of  
British philosophy at  
the time.

Facts impinge on observer from outside, independent of consciousness

knowledge only from  
senses, experience,  
verifiable truth, not  
traditions/belief/  
imagination/abstraction

Process of reception is passive

# THE RANKIAN TRADITION

- Leopold von Ranke: Credited with the beginning of modern historiography
- The past should be understood/studied in isolation from the present
- The historian should write about the past based on 'sources'
- But not all sources are equal
- Emphasis on providing references
- The primacy of facts

Past understood from sources/ references. Some better than others. Should understand in isolation from present.

BEGINNING OF  
MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

# THE HISTORICAL POSITIVISM OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

- The Rankian call: wie es eigentlich gewesen
- Claiming history as a science
- Aligned with the British empericist tradition
- Facts are like sense-impressions
- Their reception is a passive act
- A common-sense view of history

'simply to show how it really was?

History = science,  
aligned with British  
empericist tradition.

Facts = sense - impressions  
Receive passively.

Necessary condition of historian's work not essential function

**Housman**

Accuracy is a duty, not a virtue

## WHAT IS A HISTORICAL FACT?

- Are all facts about the past of relevance to the historian?
- Certain basic facts form the backbone of history → same for all historians
- Not the ones with which the historian is primarily concerned
- Who decides what is a basic fact of history?  
Historian decides which facts to give the focus in which order/context.
- Can a fact from the past be promoted to a fact of history?  
Historical facts existing objectively and independently of interpretation of historian is a fallacy.

Yes if enough

historians

accept the  
interpretation

where an incident

is cited as significant

valid &

Prof  
Barracough

History we read, though based on facts,  
not factual at all, but a series of  
accepted judgements.

## HISTORIANS OF THE ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL WORLDS

- What survives across generations to become the facts of Antiquity?
- The preservation of the past is a selective process
- What we know of 5th century BCE Greece is a picture formed by a small group of people
- Why do we know that medieval world was deeply religious?

Know about Greece from  
Athenian pov, not  
Spartan/Corinthian/Theban/  
Persian/slaver non-citizen  
resident.

↳ Chroniclers professionally occupied  
in theory/practice of religion  
- Thought important, recorded  
everything related to it,  
not much else.

facts in documents still need to be procured by a historian before he makes use of them

Older historians had ignorance of many facts, simplifies & clarifies, selects & omits.

## THE PLIGHT OF THE MODERN HISTORIAN

must cultivate ignorance themselves

- The more recent past is more knowable
- Has a dual task
  - 1) Of discovering few significant facts and turning them into the facts of history
  - 2) Of discarding many 'insignificant' facts as unhistorical

Fetishism of facts based on a fetishism of documents → Failed belief in untiring & unending accumulation of hard facts as a foundation of history.  
Do they reveal an absolute truth? that facts speak for themselves and we cannot have too many.

Documents worshipped.

None can tell us more than the author himself.

what he thought happened / ought to happen

wanted others to think he thought what he himself thought he thoughts

Carl Becker  
Facts of history may  
don't exist till he creates  
historian till he creates  
trips.

Collingwood  
Philosophy of  
history not  
concerned w/  
past itself or

historian's thoughts  
about it by  
itself, but

rather the 2 things  
in their mutual timeshare diff meanings at diff. Understanding of others mind,  
Historian needn't love or emancipate other always appear to  
himself from the past, master & understand malign.  
it as key to present only.

Croce: history = seeing past through  
eyes of present, in light  
of its problems.

Historian's main  
work not to  
record but to  
evaluate

If you don't  
evaluate, how  
to know what's  
worth  
recording.

## THREE THINGS ABOUT FACTS AND HISTORY

historians largely get the kind of facts they want.

- There exist no pure facts to appreciate fully.
- The historian needs to have some imaginative understanding of the minds of their subject

↳ US/Soviet writings  
of each other

↓  
Can view part only through  
present's eyes. Diff words  
fail to have ever basic  
understanding of others mind,

This words/actions of each

## Dangers

- Emphasis of role of historian in making of history rules out any objective history at all.
  - | Doesn't follow that since interpretation necessary to establish facts of history and no interpretation fully objective, that facts of history aren't amenable to objective interpretation.
- If only view period of history through eyes of own time to study problems of the past, will have pragmatic view of facts, right interpretation will be decided based on suitability to some purpose

Input /output historian process must occur in parallel. If gov separate:

- Either Scissor/paste with no meaning , or
- Historical fiction with facts to support propaganda.

## What is History?

Continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts.

Unending dialogue between present and past.