

Can a historian look
at the past
objectively?



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In the following lines, it is going to be discussed the statement “ It is impossible for an historian not to view the recent past through a moral or ideological lens ”.

In order to offer a deeper insight in the topic, it has been considered appropriate to reformulate the statement, turning it into a question and formulating it in a positive way. As well, though we will go back to it later, it has been considered as well to remove the nuance “ recent” from the question. Thus, this is the result: “ It is possible for a historian not to view the past through a moral and ideological lens?”.

These modifications, that as we may see don't distort the essence of the original proposal, will make easier to think about the topic, as facilitates the task of consider it from a historical and epistemological-based perspective, which enables us to give a broader picture about it and its historical roots. Anyway, in the conclusion, the original statement will be brought back again, and answered.

The first step before going deep in this issue, is to define briefly what do we understand for “ moral and ideological lens”.

To question if history is written through a “ moral lens”, applied to the case of historical studies, can be understood as questioning whereas all studies in the field are morally biased or not; what is to say, if beneath any text is it possible to find some clues about the moral position of the author.

To explain what it is understood by “ ideological lens”, it has been judged appropriated the definition given by professor Michael Hunt:

“ an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduce the complexity of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensive terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality”[1].

Maybe this definition can seem too broad, but it has been chosen precisely because of that: it allows to include in this category not only the structures of thought that are usually considered as ideologies, such as Marxism or Liberalism, but as well different intellectual trends or other theories of knowledge. In other words, “ ideology” is understood as an accepted body of ideas that helps to conduct a research and explain processes, in the field of social sciences. Hence, an approach through an “ ideological lens” consists on the analysis and reconstruction of historical events through the referential points given by this structure.

So, the discussion about if it is possible for a historian whether to see or not the recent past through a moral or ideological lens is about his capacity of keeping his own position and concerns outside the view of the past that is offering through his writings.

In the end, the issue under discussion here can be identified with the recurring argument in historiography about objectivity and subjectivity in historical research. Therefore, along the essay we will make a lot of references to it.

Once the concepts have been focused, everything is ready to continue diving in our issue.

As it has been seen, the matter that occupies us can be identified with the historiographical discussion of whether objectivity is possible or not. In the following lines, we will bring up the main positions stood among scholars around this question, and the shifts that those views have experienced along the last century. This will help to give some steps towards a solution to it.

Traditionally, related to the issue of objectivity and subjectivity, from the theoretical positions among the scholars in the field, we could distinguish two currents. On one hand, those who defend that objectivity can be achievable, and that is mandatory; on the other, those who think that is not only an unrealistic aim, but an undesirable one. Of course, as always in social sciences, this distinction must not be intended to be pure and rigid.

On the first group, we could find the pioneer of the discipline Leopold Von Ranke, and his line has been followed by other historians such as Trevelyan or David Thomson[2]. Quoting Ranke, the main position of this group can be summarized in the idea that history is about “ simply to show how it really was”[3]; to learn it in its own terms. They justify this main statement in the idea that there is a need to give primacy to the facts, that them should be the main point of departure of any historical research. Hence, history should be about establishing facts in a first stance, and identifying connections, but with a total detachment from the object of study, without contaminating historical reality with personal prejudices[4].

Of course, we can find some variants among this group, as some “ objectivists” will concede some space to speculation or personal interpretation. This is the case of Trevelyan indeed, or of a XIX century

intellectual who stated that “ facts are sacred, opinion is free”[5]. But they all share the main standpoint that primacy have to be given to the facts, and that interpretation and historical reconstruction must be perfectly distinguished.

On the other hand, we could find a school of historians which can be englobed in a more “ subjectivist” trend. In this group, we can find historians such as Benedetto Croce, in the early XX century, or Carr himself, in the sixties. One of the most enlightening summaries of this view Croce’s statement “ all history is contemporary history”[6]; they understood that the task of the historian was to see the past through the eyes of the present, and to evaluate it (from it)[7]. Therefore, they argued that all his ideas, theories and assumptions, his ideological and moral background, were reflected upon the text. In this way, Carr would argue that, despite facts are the “ backbone” of historical studies, are not its reason[8]. It can be said that what he was trying to say is that facts are necessary condition, but not sufficient.

But this group distinction is not useful anymore, since the outbreak in the late XX Century of a new school of thought that shivered, and still doing, the foundations of historical theory: postmodernism.

Despite all the differences of perspective that confronted both trends, they were discussing inside a shared paradigm: modernity. Maybe they didn’t agree in the relationship of the historian with his work, in the idea of detachment, or on the “ primacy of the facts doctrine”, but all of them agreed on the idea that the achievable aim of the discipline was related to “ historical truth”. It can be counterargued that they stood a different

conception of the concept of “ historical truth”, but undoubtedly shared the standpoint that his works were referring to an external truth.

The outbreak of postmodernism from the late sixties onwards broke with this shared paradigm. From the field of philology and philosophy, the idea that there is not linkage between reality and the works that try to explain it, spread to the other branches of knowledge. Postmodernists, such as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, regarded that objectivity in historical studies must be understood as an unachievable myth, a mere “ product of what might be called the referential illusion”[9].

Following the path charted by the early postmodernists on the sixties, some historians such as Theodore Zeldin[10] accepted these basis, assuming a relativism through the acceptance of the premises that historical texts are not bound to any historical truth, so are to be seen as mere subjective personal views.[11] These assumptions were elevated to the category of “ rights”, understanding that every historical explanation should be regarded as a personal tale, concluding therefore, as Zeldin states, “ everyone has the right to find his own perspective”[12].

As we can see, if we want to preserve the binary distinction of two confronted groups, to gain a faithful picture of the current discussion, we have to reformulate it. Then, in one side we find the post-modernist view, which claims not only that any view in history is biased by moral and ideological concerns, but that everything is ideology and morals, those of the author, who stands behind the “ tale”.

On the other, those who believe that reference to historical truth is achievable. Inside this group, we may find some differences about the specific definition of truth or the role of ideology and so on, but this main point unifies them. Nowadays, it is commonly accepted that some ideological and moral bias is unavoidable[13], but among this group it is denied that this doesn't allow to reach certain objective conclusions.

So, if we want to stay in the frame of the current polemics in the field, the question about whether it is impossible not to view the past through a moral or ideological lens requires to inquiry in which way historian's pre-assumptions are reflected on his work, to which extent does it distort the vision about the past, and whether this enables us to talk about an achievable objective historical truth or not.

Until now, we have been focusing the question: first, by clarifying the concepts; later, by having a brief look to the status of the issue among scholars. The latter point lead us to the stance that is widely accepted that moral and ideology are present in any historical work.

There is no one easy answer to what are the implications of it, and we have thought that the best way of understanding it is by revising some of the main elements that take part in historical research. Through a brief study of how history is made, we will be able to understand how the moral and ideological assumptions of the author, his subjectivity, are present on his works. But before that, as are very related to the question of " How?", it would be interesting to have a brief look to the question of " What is the historian looking for?" and the reasons of why is it judged of interest. Of course, the

questions of “ What?” and “ Why history?” would deserve a whole essay. But our aim is not to tackle with the topic of the nature of history. Therefore, we will devote just a few lines to these matters.

4. 1) What?

The question of “ what history is” was first critically formulated by Ranke, who developed the idea that history’s aim was to study it in its own terms, “ how it really was”[14]. The idea was that the historian had to go to the archives, and collect facts which would explain how was the past. So, we can say, he understood that history was a reality that resided in the sources, and that was within reach for the historian, who could carry on a reconstruction of it. This conception of history explains why some historians from the positivist school, in the late XIX Century, thought that they were near the moment where, been all the archives revised, definite historical truth was going to be reached[15].

The problem is that it seems to be an out-of-focus vision. The past is not “ out there” anymore, it is dead. This have been emphasized by some historians along the XX Century, such as Marwick who remarks the idea that past doesn’t exist anymore, and that all we have from it are “ relics and traces” through which the historian has to work in order to offer a more or less plausible synthesis of the past[16]. And this can be complemented with Carr’s emphasis on the fact that historical research is made from the present, from a different context and perspective than its object of study[17]. Though sometimes is near falling in a relativist view often criticised by other scholars, as Elton did[18], he has helped to develop among

the discipline a valuable concern about how our study of the past is conducted by interests and “ways of doing” moulded by the present time.

So, this leads us to a new idea of “history” as a discipline: instead of the reconstruction of the past, it is a representation where the role of the historian should be taken into account. The past is dead, and it is not going to be brought into live again. What we only have are traces, rests, ruins of it, and the task of the historian is to create explanatory models from them, trying to be faithful to the historical reality they refer to.

In a metaphorical way, we can say that “history” is like the representation of a landscape painted by a painter backwards it, guided by the indications of a man in who he relies. He doesn't see the landscape, but he can create a more or less faithful image of it; depending on how skilful he is, on his capability of asking the accurate questions to his friend, on his ability of deduction and his experience and so on, he would create a better or worse representation of it. But the representation would not be an exact reproduction of the landscape. First, because it would not be the intention: it is a 2-D representation of a 3-D reality. But as well because a lot of data would be missed, even being his friend a good guide, and the painter would have to deduce some of the connections made on the canvas, implying all his capacities of reasoning, deducing, comparing, thinking... always at service of the, for him fragmented, reality that is trying to portray.

Following this example, a postmodernist could argue that is pointless to think that there could be a real bond between our blind painter's representation and the landscape. So, he shouldn't try it; what he would have to do is to be

conscious that his representation is a totally disengaged vision of the landscape, so what he would only be able to do is to create freely his own personal interpretation. But then he wouldn't be accomplishing the task he has been initially asked: to reach a proper representation of the landscape. He would create a beautiful and colourful composition, but a meaningless one.

Coming back from the metaphor, the historian who is unaware of the object of study, history, cannot be conceived as a writer of history, but of poetry or literature. Hence, post-modernism is not applicable to history, as both are incompatible: the historian who fully accepts that premises cannot be called a historian, as he is rejecting the main foundation of the discipline: to offer a proper representation of history.

So, what we can conclude from all this is: a) Historian aspires, at most, to a representation of the past. b) Hence, the historian, with his moral and ideological beliefs, is present on his work, as he interprets and establishes connections from the present. c) This doesn't mean that the outcome is a mere creation: his construction is supposed to be bonded to reality, to the ideal of "how it was". If he rejects that, reducing it to a mere self-expression of personal moral and ideological points of view, is doing anything but history.

4. 2) Why?

This issue will be briefly sketched out, with the main aim of presenting the point of view stood along the essay. Why history? Why is historical inquiry of interest?... We have found an almost infinite range of points of view along

the bibliography selected, from its justification due to the explanation of development of human values through history, to the argument that is the only way of understand our contemporary context.[19]As we will see on following lines the “ Why?” stood by the historian determines the “ How?” is the research carried on.

But, however, there is an essential characteristic that lies under any of the different points of view: interest in history stems from the interest of understanding the human being in society. And from there, different ways of facing this issue enrich the whole.

Hence: a) There is not a specific answer to the question “ Why history?”, but all can be summarized in the “ study of the past of the human being in society”. b) The different ways and perspectives through it is studied enriches the whole.

4. 3) How?

Once the questions of the “ What?” and “ Why?” history have been overviewed, we are reaching the central point of this essay: to see which is the role played by the ideological and moral own views of the historian in his work through answering to the question of “ How is it done?”. Having a look to some of the essential aspects that intervene in the process of writing history will enable us to see how historian’s personal concerns are reflected on his work and how does this happen.

First, a brief insight to the relationship between the historian and the facts and sources[20]. Carr defines it through a comparison with fishery:

“[Facts] are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend [...] on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use- these two factors been determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch.”[21]

What he is trying to explain is how the historian is not a mere passive processor of data, but an active agent from the very starting point of selecting the information in which is going to root his research. But the question is: in base to what does he make the selection? In base to his own concerns? Or in base of the preferences of history? What is to say: the facts he looks for are determined by his own interests or by what history demands?

As we have argued previously, history is about a representation of the past, where it is the main character, the object of study. So, it seems that would make sense to assert that the questions that the historian asks to the raw materials may be pounded faithfully to the “ preferences of history”. Of course, at a first stance, when he hardly knows anything about the topic is going to study, his research will be driven by questions raised in the present, related to his concerns. But this will change progressively as he makes progress.

Through inquiring the raw sources, to “ make them talk”[22], the historian comes up with more questions, but this time not formulated in base to the present but to the “ foreign country”[23]which is been re-visited. And by keeping this process, he manages to go deeper in the past, to understand better the people who lived there, the process that affected their lives.

So, in theory, it appears to be possible the goal set by Ranke of getting to know the past “ in its own terms”[24]. But when we examine any work of history, even the considered to be the best ones, we discover that, indeed, this doesn't happen. Every history book or paper can be classified in an ideological or moral spectrum due to its conclusions. In order to understand properly why does this happen, in the next lines we are going to proceed to an insight to what has been called “ the nature of the historian”. Through this, we will go back to some of the issues which have just been covered.

So, in the following lines we are going to deal with the issue of the “ nature of the historian” in what pretends to be an invitation for the reader to think about who is the historian and how does his moral and ideological point of view affects his historical production. We will focus on three aspects, which are those who have been seen to be the most problematic: context, ideology as framework and categories as a vehicle for indirect judgement.

As is aforementioned, the historian is not a machine, but a human who has his own beliefs and experiences emotions, who is part of his society, so shares the cultural background of his epoch and is affected by academic theories or trends. As Jordanova argues

“ all historians have ideas already in their minds when they study primary materials- models of human behaviour, established chronologies, assumptions about responsibility, notions of identity and so on”[25].

On the other hand, the historian is a professional devoted to the study from the past, through the construction of explanatory models of it in the most accurate way possible. Hence, we can detect the dual reality of the historian,

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which causes tensions. Let's have a look to how all this corpus of premises affects the historian's craft.

First of all, we have to bear in mind that the historian is part of a specific time and society that constrains him when creates his explanatory models about the past. For example, a historian in the sixties would be attracted by schools such as the *cliometricians* in the US or *Annales* in France, based on theories that championed more integration of the discipline with other social sciences such as sociology or economy, as some of them they understood that it was the way of reaching certain and objective conclusions[26]. This was translated into the predominance of a history based on the processing of data, quantifiable perspectives of the past, on analysis rather than narrative, predominance of social perspective rather than the study of individuals and so on.[27]

Part of this schools where Emmanuel Roy de Laudurie and Lawrence Stone, who argued respectively that “ history that is not quantifiable cannot claim to be scientific”[28]and that quantification was the way of pushing back widely spread historical myths[29].

But this conception wrecked partly because of its own exhaustion, partly because new trends surpassed it, such as post-modernist trends (that emphasized the study of the unconscious instead of data at a social level), “ radical historians” (that argued for a more narrative history instead of analysis and promoted new objects of study such as what they understood of the “ hidden and oppressed” of history)[30], and so on. And with this change of paradigm, a lot of supporters of the “ quantitative view” changed their

mind, as is the case of both Le Roy and Stone. The former wrote in the sixties a book about the collective imagery in a French medieval village; the latter is well known for having written a high-impact paper claiming for the revival of narrative[31].

As we can see, if changes the context where the ideological premises of the historian have been built, also changes the way of understanding it. In the end, changes the anthropological conception of who and how the human being is. Is the case of Le Roy: his idea of human as a being constrained by the means of production rooted in a materialist view of the world gave way to a new vision where the un-material (imaginaries and so on) was judged as more relevant in order to explain his anthropological basis. Hence, we can see that the context may influence heavily the ideological premises of the historian; and with a shift on it, changes, consequently, his way of pondering the past.

Especially important is the case of that historiography explicitly based on an ideology. Maybe the most remarkable case is the Marxist historiography, which has kept a strong presence in the field during almost the whole XX century. Great historians such as E. P Thompson, Christopher Hill or Eric Hobsbawm didn't hesitate in defending Marxism as an especially useful point of departure for historical research[32]. As confessed Marxists they were, his studies focused on topics related to the world of labour from a materialistic perspective and dealt with categories and concepts such as "bourgeois", "class" and "class struggle", "means of production" ... full of Marxists implications.

The use of categories in history is another example of how present is historian's moral and ideological point of view in his work. Categories are not neutral, but full of implications. As we have seen, Marxist historians are predisposed to explain history through Marxist categories. But we can think on an infinite range of examples: categories such as " democratic" or " fascist", and so on, are often used as a way of setting moral judgements. Hence, through the mere choice of categories, the historian is, though implicitly, judging.

Facing this picture, it could seem that post-modernist assumptions about the impossibility of getting over one's point of view and reach historical truths are certain. To counterargue this conclusion, has been found (as Evans also does)[33]to be very useful the concept of objectivity encouraged by Thomas Haskell, which regards it more as a quality of the historian itself than of the text:

" ascetic self-discipline that enables a person to do such things as abandon wishful thinking, assimilate bad news, discard pleasing interpretations that cannot past elementary tests of evidence and logic, and, most important at all, suspend [...] one's own perceptions long enough to enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers."[34]

In the end, we could say that writing good history, capable of reaching historical truth, is about been able of transcending one's point of view and subordinate it to the historical reality faced along the study of the sources. It could be said that is a matter of primacy, of been able to give primacy to the

history rather than to one's position. Let's examine this with some of the examples aforementioned.

We have mentioned the case of Hobsbawm. As it has been said, he developed a historical analysis from a Marxist point of view. But when we say that we are not assuming that he was fitting his conclusions into that premises, enforcing reality to fit it into his ideological point of view.

Indeed, he was able to reach conclusions which challenged the traditional Marxist point of view, as happens when asserts that " macro-social analysis" difficulties to understand the nature of Revolutions by " exaggerating structure and devaluating situation", as them can only been explained historically, focusing on the specific, and not theoretically, through generalisations[35]. Or when writes about nationalism in a much more cultural way than just based on Marxist's social theory and framework[36]. Marxist theory guided his historical inquiry, but he was not closed to re-interpreting it if the sources demanded it, and was opened as well to consider historical problems without absolutizing any kind of historical causes or perspectives.

His capacity of considering all the points of view, of not closing his historical inquiry to his ideological preferences, and to giving primacy to the historical sources rather than to his personal ideological premises, makes his work valid until today[37].

A counter example would be the case of Carr, whose *History of Soviet Russia* has been often criticised because of overlooking Stalinist repression[38]. And is a precise critique: in what he said was an accurate accountant of the

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development of the Soviet state, he disregarded that crucial point due to a strong ideological bias.

Or the case of some ideologically-motivated gender history, that absolutizes ahistorical concepts, such as “ patriarchy”, fitting history into its predetermined framework[39]. Another example are Foucault’s” pseudo-historical” writings, which are more a kind of philosophical works based on historical examples, where theory clearly outweighs historical rigor.[40]In this cases, the primacy of history is not preserved; far from that, it is toughly violated, as is placed at the service of the moral and ideological framework of the writer.

We have mentioned as well the issue of categories as a way of implicit moral and ideological judgement. The historian will never get rid of it, but can perfectionate his ability to represent history accurately through them. Let’s bring again the example of the category “ fascist”. If the historian is able to understand it properly, and is conscious of all its implications, he will be able to make an appropriate use of it, according to “ historical standards”. Then, if he remains faithful to the sources, would be in the position of identifying “ fascist movements”, or “ fascist behaviours” as were historically understood in the time studied. It will, for example, help him to differentiate it from other kind of authoritarian ideologies, point which is often confused.

And this is the way that objectivity should be understood: as a capacity of detachment that allows the historian to overcome a fully present-minded and ideological interpretation. And departs from the assertion that primacy must be given to the “ demands of history”, to the guidance of the sources. A way

of assessing if this has been achieved is through the test of time: the validity of its conclusions through a wide span of time. Quoting again Tosh, is what made him to assert that Hobsbawm's " *Age of Revolution* still unsurpassed"[41], even when Marxism is not anymore seen as a reliable framework of interpretation.

All of this can be achievable only if this principle of objectivity is assumed. But it is just a necessary condition, but not sufficient. To accomplish it depends as well on the skill of the historian. But without it, doesn't matter how much skilful the historian is, that his work will not stand the test of time.

Along this essay, we have revised some polemic aspects about the historian's relationship with his object of study. First of all, after fixing definitions of " moral" and " ideology", we have revised some of the attitudes across the historiography about our topic. Then, through answering to the questions " What?", " Why?" and " How?" we have explored the relationship between the historian and history, between his perso