

Theory of knowledge critical analysis

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What are the methods of the historians and how do they compare with other methodologies:

First of all, we have to know what is the definition of history:

It is a branch of knowledge dealing with past events, political, social, economic, of a country, continent, or the world. It is an orderly description of past events. It is also a train of events connected with a person or thing.

Secondly I will define what is a method. It is 1) a system, orderliness, 2) it is a way of doing something 3) doing things with 4) it is a science or study of something.

The differences between the facts of the past and historical facts:

We all know, or think we know, what a fact is: a reliable piece of information, something we know to be, in the common sense meaning of the word "true".

We also know, or think we know, what an historical fact is. Give examples.

These are facts, definite pieces of historical knowledge, close perhaps to the natural scientific knowledge the nineteenth century historians wanted to use as their model of knowledge.

But these facts are only the start of history, only the foundation on which history is built. History is not the facts of the past alone but the processing of these facts into a coherent, meaningful interpretation of the past with which these facts are concerned.

" History is the interpretation of these facts, the processing of them into a narrative with causes and effects."

These facts, these pieces of information about the past are important to historians. Historians must be certain of their accuracy, must have confidence in their integrity before they can confidently interpret them for their contemporaries.

Historians collect their facts from whenever they can. Certain historical facts, mostly those obtained from archives, may be collected directly by historians themselves. Historians can visit public records offices or churches and examine historical documents directly.

Epigraphy is an interesting example of such a discipline. It is the study of ancient inscriptions: letters and words and symbols, chiselled, moulded or embossed on stones. E. g.: the Rosetta stone: it is an inscribed stone found near Rosetta in northern Egypt in 1799.

History is a selection:

Historians make history by selecting facts and processing them and it is the processing that creates history. History has been described as an enormous jig saw with lots of bits missing. Historians try to create the missing pieces. They can only do this by selecting from all the information available to them. What evidence we have for this comes, of course, from the people in the middle Ages who wrote about their own lives and times. And the people who wrote about their own lives and times in the middle Ages in Europe were monks and priests.

Imaginative understanding is an important part of an historian's skill, but imaginative understanding varies from historian to historian. They have to

imaginatively understand the minds of the older people. The only way they can do this is by using their own thought processes. Historians recognize that to portray history is impossible. They cannot really be sure of the motives of the writers of the archive documents.

" The past can only be seen through the eyes of the present".

Historian should present their records of the past. Ranke and his fellow nineteenth century historians believed that not only was it possible to present the past " How it really was" but they also believed they were doing exactly that when they wrote their history books. The historian's job was to collect together a proven body of facts and present them to the readers.

Is history a unique area of knowledge?

We have seen that natural sciences, mathematics and logic, and the social sciences have distinctive areas of knowledge. Can a similar claim be made for history? YES of course it can be made!!!!. One way of answering this question is to look at the work of historians. As we do this, we should ask ourselves the question " What do historians do that scientists, mathematicians and social scientists do not do?"!!!!.

Four different stages exists:

1) Recording: Some scholars collect records and preserve evidence from the past. If we stick to our definition of historians as interpreters of facts these scholars are not historians in our sense of the word. They are archivists and curators, collectors and preservers. E. G: Nothing is moved until photographs are taken, measurements made and meticulous records compiled of

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everything that is there and exactly where it is. That is the work of the historical researchers who record and preserve evidence from the past. Every objects is recorded and, as far as possible identified. The historical knowledge these Historians have is no different from the knowledge of natural science: it is empirical and of course objective. Give example of the titanic.

2) Assessment: These historians asses the evidence they have, compare it to other similar evidences that might be available and come to the conclusion that Holden's room are indeed a unique historical event.

3) Reconstructing the past: Having assessed the evidence and accepted its importance, historians now have to use it, to infer from it and to reconstruct the past. They use evidences. Historians also are interested in reconstructing beyond the obvious. They attempt to reconstruct the values of a wealthy youth 100 years ago.

4) Interpreting: Historians ask themselves questions. They might compare the artefacts with other atifacts for instance...

Historians' ways of knowing are distinct. They record, assess, reconstruct and interpret in a way that others scholars do not. Historians continually reinterpret the events of the past and reappraise them for each new generation.

Historical sources:

Primary and secondarysources:

The problem with the past is that it has passed. It has gone. The idea of all time past, and present, running parallel is intriguing but until we have the technology to explore other times in reality, we have to explore the past through what the past has left us, through the multitude of artefacts surviving from times past. Historians use what they term PRIMARY SOURCES as their main access to the past. Secondary sources are also available: these are sources of information provided by other historians.

Primary sources are the bedrock of history. They include every conceivable type of documents: maps, treaties, churches and temple records, imperial archive documents, letters, legal records, diaries, newspapers, catalogues and even bus tickets. They can be formal or informal, private or public, serious or frivolous. Primary sources also include artefacts.

Unlike science, say, history is often criticized for serving no purpose. We are unable to learn from history, it is argued, either because precisely the same circumstances as in the past cannot arise again in future, or because if sufficiently similar circumstances did arise, we would not be able to act differently.

In the natural sciences we have both statements of immediate observations, reporting for instance the outcome of an experiment, and general laws from which we can derive predictions. These two kinds of statements are justified in quite different ways: observational statements by perception.

The evidence, not necessarily written, which historical research is based on are the 'sources'. Sources need not be items that go back to the time in

history which is being studied, but can be texts written since then about that time: the former are called primary, and the latter secondary sources.

There are two main questions that must be asked regarding primary sources. The first of these concerns their authenticity, or genuineness. Suppose that we have, for instance, a painting of a particular historical event; then the painter may have added or omitted certain details to please his customer, or to make it a better painting, he may not have been there himself and have used incomplete accounts, the painting could even be a later forgery, and so on.

The other question concerns their completeness. We must bear in mind that the material available to us has already been systematically selected, in a variety of ways: we tend to know more about the upper classes of the societies we study, because it is largely their doings that were recorded, while we find many ruins in some parts of the world, little remains of the wooden structures that were more common elsewhere, and so on.

On one side there are those who hold that historical explanation must be like the scientific explanation of an event: to understand an historical event, we must have a general, or 'covering' law, so that from this law and a description of the historical situation we can deduce that the event would happen.

For even where history is capable of being objective, there are problems with the 'evidence' it is based on, as we have seen: the sources available may not be authentic, and they will certainly be incomplete. And to the extent that history is (necessarily) subjective, i. e. a matter of the position from which it

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is written, historical accounts or explanations are liable to the problem of bias, i. e. partiality, tendentiousness or even prejudice.

The historian cannot be objective about the period, which is his subject. In this he differs (to his intellectual advantage) from its most typical ideologists, who believed that the progress of technology, 'positive science' and society made it possible to view their present with the unanswerable impartiality of the natural scientist, whose methods they believed themselves (mistakenly) to understand.

For much of the time that history has been written, the work of the historian was not thought to be particularly problematic -- as long as he had the right intentions, he would just try to discover the truth, and "tell how it really was."

The first law for the historian is that he shall never dare utter an untruth. The second is that he shall suppress nothing that is true. Moreover, there shall be no suspicion of partiality in his writing, or of malice.

History, then, is not, as it has so often been misdescribed, a story of successive events or an account of change. Unlike the natural scientist, the historian is not concerned with events as such at all. He is only concerned with those events, which are the outward expression of thoughts. ...