

The limits of the historians objectivity history essay



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Carl Becker, along with Charles Beard, started a controversy over the purpose of historical writing and the limits of the historians objectivity that continues to agitate American historians and philosophers. Is historical objectivity a possibility? In practice, a historian takes past thought and tries to arrange it in some meaningful way. Historians perform a kind of confidence trick because they write as if they are unveiling truth and they want their readers to agree with them. Unfortunately, there is no singular truth on which historians will agree. Regardless of how well it is written, no matter how the evidence is reconstructed, it won't be the " truth" due to the issues of interpretation and inference. In the end, historians draw inferences from a single experiment. History can't be recreated. History is an intricate process as opposed to the scientific method involving experimentation and verification through the repetition of experiment. History keeps grasping for the truth but it is always out of reach.

" The assumptions on which the idea of historical objectivity rest include a commitment to the reality of the past and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and above all between history and fiction." [1] " The historian's primary allegiance is to ' the objective historical truth' and to professional colleagues who share a commitment to cooperative, cumulative efforts to advance toward that goal." [2]

Thesis

This essay is an assessment of the theory of relativism, the belief that points of view have no absolute truth or validity, having only relative, subjective

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value according to differences in perception and consideration, and the application of this theory by Carl Becker, a Progressive Historian. Becker's resounding repudiation of objective history ushered in an era of relativist historiography.[3]The focal points in Becker's relativism were the subjectivity of historical facts, history as a product of the historian's imagination, and the influence of the contemporary ' climate of opinion'[4]in shaping the historian's view of the past. Becker argued that relativism has a skeptical factor – the historian's account of the past can be genuine knowledge only to a very limited degree and is fundamentally a temporary appraisal, based on the historian's interests and values, which are themselves conditioned by his particular time, circumstances, and personality and a pragmatic factor – the assumption that historical reconstructions are functional adjustments of an organism to its environment, made to satisfy the current needs and hopes of the historian's social group.”[5]“ The principal argument of historical relativists was that historical interpretations always had been and always would be ' relative' to the historian's time, place, values and purposes.”[6]

During the 1890's, the claim by scientific historiography, which identified the search for a New History[7]with waiting for results from a patient application of the scientific method was being challenged. The early Progressive Era's demeanor highlighted a tension in scientific history between the promise of a modern version of the American understanding of history and the actuality of a discipline that stressed the gradual and cautious construction of such a version.

Only a few Progressive American historians, among them Becker, engaged in a serious discussion of historical objectivity and truth. “ Historical objectivity <https://assignbuster.com/the-limits-of-the-historians-objectivity-history-essay/>

is not a single idea, but rather a sprawling collection of assumptions, attitudes, aspirations, and antipathies.”[8]

As early as 1910, Becker expressed his skepticism about the ability to capture the real past. In a letter to William Dodd (December 25, 1931), Becker mentions that “ The only circumstance which would make historical research & study futile would be the achievement of what is so commonly thought to be the aim of research – i. e. the attainment of final truth. If enough really ‘ definitive work could be written, then there would be nothing further to do in the way of research. Then historical research would indeed be futile.”[9]

Becker believed that every generation captures the same history in a new way, utilizing a new construction. He has also been quoted as saying “ We build our conceptions of history partly out of our present needs and purposes.” In a letter to William Dodd (January 27, 1932), Becker wrote “ Hence history has to be rewritten by each generation. Even if the facts are the same, the slant on the facts will be different.”[10]Becker’s goal is to demonstrate that history is important because it shows us the present values of society. Becker often said that he was not interested in the facts of history, because he said the fact itself was a subjective construction. Relativism rejects the possibility of a correlation between what can be observed and the abstract concepts. Since nothing is conceived independent of the relative experiences of different individuals and cultures, and therefore, nothing can be generally real to all, there are not one but many realities.

Analysis

In the late 1800's, American historians were developing their "rules and protocols", including addressing the idea of historical objectivity. These were based substantially on European practices and thoughts regarding the subject, frequently enrolling in European universities, typically German, to get "first hand" experience. American historians that studied in Germany came away with a belief that historical study meant the adoption of the purely empirical and neutral approach of the natural sciences.[11] In the midst of an international political crisis that Protestants defined as a struggle against arbitrary authority, science presented new standards for arriving at the truth.[12] The sense that a modernization which relied too heavily on a method was incomplete produced the temptation to import elements for a new American historiography – "New History" – from Germany. Science allowed alternatives to be imagined in everything from politics to religion.

In 1891, Frederick Jackson Turner, a young professor at the University of Wisconsin, published an article in which he discussed his version of New History. To Turner, New History involved a historiography characterized as cultural, social, encompassing, total, integrated, or synthetic.[13] Turner advocated a constant ascendancy toward the scientific understanding of history rather than a sequence of different views on history, remaining firmly aligned within scientific history's limits. Turner was interested in increasing history's usefulness by expanding its context. The space Turner chose as his central explanatory concept was America's uniqueness.[14] Turner realized that his new American history with space as its center needed to be

supported scientifically. By the early 1900's, history had become more "broadly and intimately human"[15] as it was gradually widening its scope beyond politics to other aspects of human life such as religion, literature, and language.

To American historians, Leopold von Ranke, widely considered the father of modern historical scholarship, was "empirical science incarnate".

[16] Ranke's reputation as a non-philosophical empiricist bolstered a contemporary American tendency to disparage philosophical speculation about history. The idealization of Ranke was almost mystique among some historians – their last refuge of the image of the historian as a scientist.

Empiricists argue that historians can justify their interpretations using logic of either vindication or refutation. Logics of vindication tell us how to determine whether a given historical analysis is or is not true. Logics of refutation tell us how to determine whether a given historical analysis is or is not false. They both ground objectivity in straightforward confrontations with a given past that can be confronted with facts.

"The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed striking shifts in the thinking about the natural world and humanity's place in it, which have been come to be called the Scientific Revolution." [17] It is the most important and talked about era in the history of science. The Scientific Revolution provided the genesis of modern science. "There are two kinds of scientific historians: those who seek to establish some all-embracing theory of the structure and direction of the course of historical events, which are assumed to fall into a pattern with the regularity and predictability of phenomena in the natural

sciences, and those who find the substance of history in isolated, externalized happenings, which are the “ facts” it is the historian’s sole duty to establish in a spirit of neutral, passive, detachment.”[18]In a letter to Louis Gottschalk (September 3, 1944), Becker suggested that “ In history therefore, our causes are not on the scientific level or the philosophical level, but on the practical level of everyday life.”[19]

“ Some see the Scientific Revolution as a sharp break from the medieval world – a time when we all became modern.”[20]Frequently called the early modern period, it was characterized by an increasing number of people asking questions about the natural world, new answers to those questions, and the development of new ways of gaining answers. “ Many of the questions early moderns strove to answer were posed in the Middle Ages, and many methods used for answering them were products of medieval investigators.”[21]Typically, however, these early moderns discredited the medieval period and claimed that their work was new despite the fact that they, in many cases, simply retailed the prior work to fit the changing times.

To understand Becker’s thesis of utilizing logic of comparison instead of either vindication or refutation, one must understand the traditional view of the Enlightenment which was based on three main concepts. The first was reason – all beliefs, institutions, and customs should be subjected to critical and empirical reasoning. This was also the age of skepticism and the philosophes were Deists who only believed in the Christian doctrines that met the test of reason. They thought it was reasonable to believe in God, but

they believed in a God who had created and set the universe moving, but then left it alone.

The second key enlightenment concept was nature. Philosophes believed that nature was governed by simple unchanging laws functioning in line with reason. No human prayer would alter its behavior.

Finally the Enlightenment was governed by the ideals of change and progress, and that humans were in the process of perfecting themselves. Central to enlightened hopes was the goal of extending scientific thinking to man and society.[22]Once again, Becker had a different interpretation – he believed that ethical problems throughout history proved to be very similar on closer inspection. Becker challenged the traditional view by saying that Christianity and faith was a part of the Enlightenment, the 13th and the 18th centuries were very similar, and the Philosophes were less detached from Christian thought, than previously believed. Becker argued that the 18th century philosophes did not have a fear of God, but had respect for an anonymous deity. The universe was not created in six days by God, but was designed by a deity according to a rational plan. Becker argued that the 18th century philosophes “ Knowing beforehand that the truth would make them free, they were on the lookout for a special brand of truth, a truth that would be on their side, a truth they could make use of in their business.”[23]Becker concluded that in order to sustain their moral visions, the 18th century philosophes in varying contexts depended on ambiguous commitments about nature and morality derived from Christianity.[24]Enlightened histories claimed to be replacing error with truth, but they were in reality trading new

myths for old. Myths became the chosen vehicle for imparting religious or moral doctrines.

In the early 1900's, James Robinson, Charles Beard and Carl Becker began to construct a New History that eventually came to be known as Progressive History. In their radical questioning of conventional conceptions, they had an ally in pragmatism, the major philosophical influence of their time. The most successful challenge to scientific history's claim to be the properly modern American understanding of history came from these three, acting in the spirit of Columbia University – a university set upon a hill to radiate the cause of the intellect and of reform to American culture.[25] Becker and Beard are considered the pioneers of Progressive History, considered by many as an experiment in modernization that aimed to outdate scientific history.

Becker openly criticized the scientific historians for their position that to be scientific meant “ to assume, in respect to historical events, the objective and detached attitude of the mind with which the scientist regarded natural phenomena.”[26] This criticism was rooted in Becker's belief that there must be a “...concern, a deep involvement with the fate of the movements, the ideas, and the institutions...”[27]

In a letter to Charles Beard (September 1938), Becker states that “ What they can't forgive you for is saying ... that history is an act of faith, or something like that. If you had said that history is a science and gives us truth about the past, why you could then have said all you have said (which virtually demonstrates that history is not a science) and all would have been

well. You are casting doubt on the absolute value & truth of their studies – that’s why they call you a defeatist.”[28]

Conclusion

Progressive History was not just a feature of the era but a key component of the greater transformation of historiography in Western civilization. While Turner’s New History was an international initiative, the success of Progressive History would depend on if it could convince the American public and scholars that its view of American history adjusted the American sense of history to the new realities of American life in what contemporaries understood to be a modern manner.

Relativists like Becker faced a continuing dilemma.[29]They thought it axiomatic that every historical account inevitably passed through the filters of the preconceptions, interests, and intentions of the historian. Becker (and Beard) tried to ground the study of history in a new philosophy, appropriate to the development of modern thought. As Becker noted, “ the trouble with so many contributions to knowledge is that they are made by scholars who know all the right answers but none of the right questions.”[30]

Contemporary scientific methods, and similarly, the contemporary practices in historiography, are thought to be able to describe events and history for us. These approaches, however, are not sufficient for explanation or understanding. To understand, interpretation is fundamental. Interpretation, however, can be problematic due to past experiences, interests, and values.

The inquisitive and scientific mind can find some relief from the perils of interpretation by a continuous questioning of the common occurrences, and <https://assignbuster.com/the-limits-of-the-historians-objectivity-history-essay/>

by putting what is common to the test through examination of exceptions for a new understanding. In a letter to Charles Beard (December 27, 1938), Becker characterizes a book by Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* as a “ refutation of relativism” and Becker specifically cites that “... the crucial refutation is achieved by denying that there is, as the Relativists claim, any distinction between ‘ facts’ and ‘ interpretation’ of facts.”[31]

Progressive History became a composite interpretation of history in which elements affirming the transnational tendencies of science, technology and industry with their impact on human life were intertwined with those stressing the uniqueness in the American understanding of history.[32]

Many philosophers reject the possibility of objective historical knowledge. This does not, however, predetermine that one must forego the concept of historical objectivity. As Becker contends, if the objectivity is based on comparison rather than a given past, in fact, historical objectivity is possible. Objective interpretations include those that best meet criteria of accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, progressiveness, and openness. Among the elements of historical study, truthfulness and memorability have been the most essential. These qualities continue to be the subject of concern and criticism. Problems of objectivity and truth value have become even more worrisome in the wake of this century’s ‘ crisis of historicism’[33]when notions of objective truth were victimized by various forms of subjectivism and relativism.[34]“ On its intellectual side, the crisis of our time is a crisis of our interpretation of history; in particular, it is a crisis in the attitude we ought to take toward the liberal interpretation of modern history.”[35]Becker
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(and Beard) has an important place in American thought because of their closeness to this crisis of the modern mind. “ To regard all things in their historical setting appears, indeed,” as Carl Becker said, “ to be an instructive procedure of the modern mind. We do it without thinking, because we can scarcely think at all without doing it.”[36]

“ Becker called on the historian to cast off the chains which bound him to the idol of science. He believed the scientific historians had distorted the purpose, method and value of historical inquiry. They had failed to recognize the radically humanistic quality of their subject.”[37]Becker believed the historian and the scientist had different objectives. His search for a philosophical approach to history was an attempt to view the historian and his subject in finite, human terms.