

The role of the historian history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The role of the historian is a much debated issue with different perspectives provided by different schools of thought, and is an essential part of history as a whole. The Source, an excerpt from *The gift of the past: Towards a critical history* by Patrick Joyce, discusses a lot of issues raised in regards to the role of the historian such as the idea that sources are memory, the politicisation of history and the attainability of truth. The historians Thucydides, Edward Carr and Keith Jenkins also talk about similar issues which are shaped by their context and their school of thought.

The Source, as mentioned before is an excerpt from *The gift of the past: Towards a critical history* where Patrick Joyce raises the issues mentioned above. He suggests that all a historian does is $\frac{1}{2}$ practices a critical method $\frac{1}{2}$ towards his or her own work and other historical accounts. He suggests that all this is about the $\frac{1}{2}$ creation of knowledge $\frac{1}{2}$. This references to the idea that history is a science as he suggests that they practice a critical method however then is critical of this by suggesting that this is about or leads to the creation of knowledge rather than a discovery as those who argue that history is a science think. He then goes on to say that knowledge is always related to power, which when put together with his other point which says knowledge is created could suggest that power influences or creates knowledge and therefore history. This is the issue of power relations or the politicisation of history. He believes that the relationship between knowledge and power has become so common that people have forgotten about it and just consider it to be almost normal now and he thinks that $\frac{1}{2}$ we need to be reminded of the full force and significance of the connection $\frac{1}{2}$.

He then goes on to talk about how when historians encounter sources or traces from which their history would be written, they are really sites of memory. This is a small suggestion to the postmodern belief that historical truth is unattainable as he suggests that sources are really just different sites of memory and inherently memory is not always 100% accurate. He then goes on to suggest that this is not individual memory but rather collective or public memory and that it is shaped by many forces. He suggests that history is always in a sense public, meaning he believes that history is shaped by many forces, which in short he says that the creation of history is a political matter. He is suggesting that the history is only created for political purposes or is itself a political matter used for selfish purposes by those in power.

He concludes by saying that since there is such a strong relationship between knowledge and power, how do we know where the truth of history lies? He also questions if it is possible to obtain this truth suggesting that it isn't as he thinks that all truth has a history that is inseparable from power and the politics of knowledge?

One of the issues raised was that of the attainability of truth when looking at history and the past. Patrick Joyce believes as can be seen in the Source that since there is such a strong correlation between knowledge and power in history and that they are inseparable so truth can not possibly be obtained. This is the general postmodernist view in regards to historical truth and would be supported by the postmodern historiographer Keith Jenkins. Keith Jenkins was born in Britain in 1943. He studied medieval and modern history in the 70s, an era where postmodernism began to emerge in

historiography. He was greatly influenced by the writings of Hayden White, as well as people like Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher. Jenkins deals mostly with the definition of history and challenges traditional perceptions of history shown through his attacks on people like E. H. Carr in his works. Keith Jenkins believes that after interpenetration of many $\frac{1}{2}$ modes $\frac{1}{2}$, the historian produces a story, which by definition already suggests that he thinks that truth is not attainable. He ridicules the notion of achieving objectivity and finding truth in his works because he believes it is impossible.

This postmodernist view of Joyce and Jenkins is greatly contrasted with that of the empirical historian Thucydides. Thucydides lived between 460 and 411 BCE and can be seen as $\frac{1}{2}$ the father of scientific history $\frac{1}{2}$. He was greatly influenced by the Peloponnesian war, a war between Athens and Sparta, his role in it, earlier historians such as Herodotus and the golden age of Athens which was a period of Athenian political dominance, economic growth and cultural flourishing. He greatly believed that the role of the historian was to $\frac{1}{2}$ extract the truth from the lies $\frac{1}{2}$ (Warren, p17) and he himself wrote the History of the Peloponnesian War $\frac{1}{2}$ in search of truth $\frac{1}{2}$. So his view was quite definitely that truth is attainable which is in strong contrast to the view of Joyce and Jenkins.

These two views regarding the attainability of historical truth are often seen as the two opposite extremes with the middle ground often being regarded as the relativist view, one such example is the view of E. H. Carr. Edward Hallett Carr was born in 1892 and died in 1982. He became fascinated by the Russian literature and culture that was present in Riga, Latvia which

encouraged him to spend much of his career to write about the Soviet Union. He was greatly influenced by what one of his professors at Cambridge said about Herodotus's view and it being moulded because of the time he was living in, this led to Carr's development of his ideology of relativism. He was also probably also somewhat influenced by the radical thinking of the period. Carr would suggest that a certain extent of truth can be obtained by studying the historian before you begin to study the facts (E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, pg. 23). It is the view that basically historians will be affected by their own context and ideologies while writing history so it is necessary to study those and to understand how that would have affected their writings.

Another issue presented by Joyce in the Source is that of the politicisation of history or the relationship between knowledge and power. Joyce believes that history is always in a sense public and is shaped by many forces making it a political matter. However, he doesn't really talk about the effects of it except for the fact that it can make truth unattainable. The general postmodernist view which would be supported by Keith Jenkins, the view would suggest that political and public influences in history are a natural evolution of history. As postmodernists believe that interpretations are key to what constitutes so that the politicisation of history would just be another interpretation of history.

This view would again be contrasted with that of Thucydides. While he does not actually talk about this issue directly, his view can be assumed from what he believed about other key issues. He would be greatly against the politicisation of history as he strictly believed that the purpose of history was

to find truth and to act as an aid to the interpretation of the future but not itself to be created and used for personal gains or to be politicised. In regards to the relationship between knowledge and power, he does believe that the truth would reveal certain things about human nature which it was vital for those who wielded any form of power to know. (Warren, p17.)

Another issue which is closely related to that of the attainability of truth is the difference between history or sources and memory. Joyce suggests that the sources from which historians write their history are just sites of collective or public memory which therefore implies that it is not at all accurate and just other interpretations which are to be treated equally. This therefore comes to the conclusion that there is no difference between memory and history. The relativist, E. H. Carr would probably agree to this but not to the same extent as which Joyce and other postmodernists such as Jenkins would. He would agree to the fact that they are just different interpretations however, he believes that $\frac{1}{2}$ History means interpretation $\frac{1}{2}$ (E. H. Carr, What is History? pg. 27) so this issue wouldn't affect what he thinks the role of the historian is or whether he thinks relative truth is attainable or not.

In conclusion, the issues raised by Joyce in the Source show the different opinions rising from different schools of thought and their differing ideas of what the role of a historian is. It can be seen through this that it is quite hard to evaluate the role of a historian as first of all there is no clear definition of what the role of the historian is or is supposed to be as shown by the differing opinions. Even when taking the different opinions of the schools of

thoughts, it is very hard to compare and evaluate these as the postmodernist, relativist and empirical view all provide valid arguments.