

Fact and Fiction¹

It has become something of a commonplace to comment that ‘history’ must be a strange discipline, since the same word is used to denominate both the process of enquiry and the object of that enquiry itself. Unfortunately, the observation usually stops there; ‘unfortunately’, because what is at stake here is no mere linguistic curiosity but a reflection of a real methodological muddle, of which the ‘fact or fiction’ debate can be seen as but one reflection.

Around what does the debate turn? Fundamentally, on whether there really exist in history such things as ‘facts’, and, if they do, whether historians can grasp them objectively as they are or not; whether, in other words, ‘history’ (which here let us read as ‘the past’) can be said to exist independently of the mind of the historian, or whether all ‘history’ (for which here let us read as ‘historical interpretation’) is mere ‘discourse’: rootless, contingent, subjective, and relative.

Posed this way, of course, it can be seen that the debate is not about history at all really, but is in fact that hoary philosophical chestnut of the existence (or otherwise) and knowability (or otherwise) of material reality: of whether material reality exists outside of human consciousness of it, and, if it does, to what degree human beings can come to a comprehension of it.

But this problem, while it remains at the level of epistemology, is literally unsolvable. If the object of scientific study (including historical study) in general is seen as the attempt to grasp material reality theoretically, how can we know that our theoretical appropriation really is an accurate one? I suggest that the test of the status of human knowledge is precisely practice. For knowledge is valid – ‘true’ if one wishes – only insofar as it allows us engage with the world of the present (thus to shape that of the future) as we wish. Knowledge without practice is as valueless as practice without knowledge. But the acquiring of knowledge is practice too, guided by previously attained knowledge, which is why Carr’s supposition that ‘a continuous process of interaction’ is the most satisfying statement of the problem we yet have. That subsequent debate involves not an advancement on but a regression from Carr’s argument (as witnessed by Richard Evans’ descent into empiricism) is evidence of this. The real truth is that epistemology and ontology are not opposites but two sides of the same coin: without a theory of existence there can be no science of knowledge, and vice versa.

One approach to this question comes from the thought of one the Grandest Narrators, Marx: ‘The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism [...] is that [...] reality [...] is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively,’ he wrote in the first of his 1844 theses on Feuerbach. He went on: ‘The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth – i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question. [...] All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.’ (Marx, of course, ended with the famous exhortation: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.’) Marx’s collaborator Engels characteristically put it the matter a little more pithily: ‘*Im Anfang war die Tat*. And human action had solved the difficulty long before human ingenuity invented it. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.’

The ‘fact or fiction’ debate only becomes an ‘historical’ one once ‘History’ itself appears as a discipline in its own right. This observation alone should be enough to set the alarm bells ringing, for it is a curious fact that the ‘what is history?’ debate is not one much evident in other disciplines: economics, architecture, musicology, and so forth. ‘What is Business Administration?’, for example, should raise few epistemological hackles. The truth is,

¹ A response to Richard J Evans’ *In Defence of History* (Londo, 1997). See Evans’ defence of his book here: <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/evans.html>.

of course, is that this is not a debate about history at all, but about the nature of reality and the human being's place in it. Insofar as it impinges on the concerns of the history faculty, it is a debate by proxy.

But what is, then, really, 'history'? If we begin with the accepted everyday understanding of the word as 'what happened in the past', then an obvious question poses itself: why should 'what happened in the past' constitute a separate discipline in itself? Is not the object of all rational human enquiry necessarily founded, at least at some level, on what has already happened? And even if we accept the – practically accepted if theoretically question-begging – distinction between the 'natural sciences' and the 'social sciences' (question-begging not least because the former term inevitably conjures up for us the rather positivist images of Victorian botanists and men in white coats with test-tubes), is not the question posed even more forcefully? Which of the social sciences is exclusively concerned with the study of the future?

But let us for the moment accept this definition, or rather dual definition: history as, one, what happened in the past; and, two, the study of this as a discrete discipline. Another question arises, so obvious perhaps that it is something of a surprise to see it not posed more often than it is. Why study history at all? Why should what has already happened – which, if the existence of reality external to human consciousness is accepted cannot logically be changed – interest us at all? For it evidently not only does interest us, but moves us to some degree of passion: 'Auschwitz was not a discourse' is not the cry of one in danger of losing a mere parlour game.

But perhaps to pose the question like this is already to have answered it. Let us put it this way: were history really the mere collection of artefacts from the past – facts or discourses, it matters not – then it would indeed be a mere hobby. But it is not this, and nobody really can pretend for long that it is. The factor of practice, which I introduced above, is no mere methodological device. When the routinely-misquoted George Santayana said that 'Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to fulfil it,' he was not merely expounding an historical doctrine (of admittedly dubious rationality) but – inadvertently – touching on precisely that which makes us fascinated by the past and which drives us to its study: the possibility that a greater knowledge of what has happened in the past will give us an element of more control over the one single aspect of human existence over which in this life of ours we can exercise control – what has not yet happened, the future.

Thus it is that 'history' – the study of the past – emerges (or rather re-emerges) as an independent discipline, if not yet a recognised 'science', in the west as part of the culmination of the Enlightenment project. For now 'history' – understood as the past – can be for the first time for more than a millennium said to exist as an object not just worthy of study but even possible to study: now, the past can be seen as changing, and consequently the future as changeable.

The point is that without this focus of 'why history?', such differences as those over the status of facts and interpretations are inevitable (something which explains their perennial nature). History, as a discipline, has made this particular rod for its own back precisely by claiming privileged dominion over the study of the past by simple virtue of it being the past. History becomes stamp-collecting and thus creates the fertile positivist soil in which post-modernism can flourish. And, thus delimited, the debate can logically have no end because without an understanding of the practical purpose of historical research and study there can be no final court of arbitration. The argument inevitably degenerates into 'yes-it-is-no-it-isn't' and is ultimately fruitless.

Thus an understanding of the answer to the question of 'why history?' helps us to answer the other ones. To the question 'what is a historical fact?', the answer, following my reasoning above, must be that which serves us understand the past the better to shape the future. For if we can see historical study generally understood as a series of Lakatosian 'research programmes', the parameters of these programmes are not merely determined by the past but also precisely by their application in the present in shaping the future. The point is, as Perry Anderson once noted, that the past is in fact where the great bulk of ascertainable human knowledge is to be found: 'the past, which cannot be amended or undone, can be known with greater certainty than the present, whose actions have yet to be done; and there is more of it.' The past, understood literally, is both fund and testing-ground for all human scientific endeavour. If 'history' as a discipline is special, it is so because it demarcates off for itself precisely this arena as its own privilege.

But if the past does hold, as I argue that it does, such a special place for all human scientific endeavour, then what right can 'history' have in claiming it as its own? Can there be imagined a realistic possibility of an economics, a politics, a philosophy, a sociology, which cannot be permitted access to the repository and laboratory of the past? Of course there cannot, and it is for precisely this reason that I would hesitate to endorse any project of 'historicising history'. More wheels within wheels? No: the conclusion is that the tyranny of 'history' must be overthrown. Rather than a 'historicised history' – making historical enquiry both its own subject and object – we need a 're-historicised' everything else.

But this really does suggest the 'End of History', understood as a privileged academic discipline. For like the Ranters in seventeenth-century England, who saw God not as an Being external to the world but as a presence manifested in everything, once we see something as literally everywhere then for us it can indeed have no independent existence. But if it is history as an independent field of study that is at the root of the problem then dealing it such a blow would be no bad thing. And if such a procedure really does deal a mortal wound to 'History' as we have come to know it, then, on the strength of the above, I suggest we just let it bleed, and move on.

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