

TEACHING HISTORY AS A SCIENCE: A REFLECTION ON THE PRINCIPLES OF SCIENTIFIC STUDY

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Abstract

The work is designed to resolve the controversy of whether History is a science or not. Having examined the various definitions of history, that of Professor Henry Carr became so outstanding as it defines History as a continuous process of interaction between the historians and his facts, and unending dialogue between the present and the facts. While science as a body of knowledge acquired as a result of an attempt to study a certain subject in a methodological way following a determined guiding principles and way, this method and principle are also applicable to History with little or no variation. However, the paper concludes by recommending that, for History to be fully integrated into the sciences, the limitation of its study has to be considered such as interpretation of historical data, propaganda, selections, language barrier and problem of prejudice among others.

Introduction

Before one answers this question whether history is a science or not, let us define history? History is defined as branch of knowledge that deals with human past. History is broad and complex that its nature is difficult to define in precise terms. In other words, history may be defined as events of human life. Apart from this definition; other scholars have given history different definitions. Elton (1969) cited Basil Davidson as saying that history is the picture we can make of all our ancestors or what happened to them and how they lived. Professor Henry Carr defined history as a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past (Carr, 1961). Professor Alagoa defines history as the study of man through the evidences of his past action'. Collingwood defined history as research and inquiry (Collingwood, 1946). From Collingwood definition, we find out that history is a fact, that is when you are making out and inquiring, you are finding out a fact. Finally, Professor Barraclough defines history as the attempt to create the significant features of the past on the basis of impact and fragmentary evidence of the human source (Barraclough, 1955). Simply put it, history can be defined as a branch of knowledge, which deals with past events of a country, Continent or the world. These events can be political and social.

Having seen different definitions of history given by scholars, we can now discuss the nature of history.

The Nature of History

The nature of history is that of facts. The nineteenth century was a great age for facts. Nineteenth century historian on the whole agreed with it. (Grand-Grinds, 1937) The Oxford Advanced Learner's English Dictionary, a useful, but tendentious work of the empirical school, clearly marks the separateness of the two processes by defining a fact as a datum of experience as distinct from conclusion (Wehmeier, 2000), This is what may be called a common sense view of history. History consists a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are

available to the historian in documents, inscriptions and so on like fish on the fish mongers slabt.

The historian collects them, takes them home, cooks and serves them into whatever style appeals to him. It recalls the favourite dictum of the great liberal journalist C.P Scott: Facts are sacred, opinion is free. (Carr, 1961). In spite of C.P. Scott's motto, every journalist knows today that the most effective way to influence opinion is by the selection and arrangement of the appropriate facts. (Walsh, 1951). It used to be said that fact speaks for themselves. This is of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context. History deals with uniqueness and particularity, and science with the general and universal. Hobbes's famous dictum still stands. Nothing in the world is universal but names, for the things named have every one of them individual and singular. (Adeleke, 2004)

This is certainly true of the physical sciences, no two geological formations, no two animals of the same species and no two atoms are identical.

Similarly, no two historical events are identical, as one event must be one and the second event must be another. In short, no two historical events are the same, that is why historians believe that "history does not repeat itself" (Butterfield, 1962). History deals with human being which forms it subject-matter. It is believed that every event has its own unique features as well as factors which triggered it. This is known in historical parlance as causation, i.e. factors responsible for the occurrence of a historical event (Baractoush, 1955). There is the mono-causal and multi-causal situation. In most cases, however, historical events are believed to be multi-casual, that is, there are several features responsible for the take off of an event.

History is believed to be dynamic in nature. It is subject to change. Colonial apologists like Philip Curtin, Michael Crowder, Cann, Gallagher, Hugh Trevor Roper see pre-colonial African societies as basically an unprogressive, static and stagnant, and that needed civilizing force of colonialism to break that yoke of African tradition and culture (Gann, 1965). Some Africa scholars did not subscribe to the above assumption. African scholars strongly opposed the view and maintained that Africa had glorious past, tradition and custom that were strong before the coming of the European intruders. Okoro-Ijeoma in Anyanwu (2005), x-rays the Nigerian societies and maintains that before 1800 the area known as Nigeria was "mere geographical expression" with different multiplicity of pagan tribes, great number of kingdoms and empire. He went further to say that these kingdoms and empires were well organized before the coming of European intruders.

The views of the western scholars were nothing but mere academic exercise of the 20th century according to Rodney (1972). With the nature of history in mind, let us now attempt to determine the question whether history is a science or not.

What Is Science?

It is a body of knowledge acquired as a result of an attempt to study a certain subject in a methodical way following a determinate way of guiding principles. This effort produces a body of systematically related knowledge arranged in an orderly way. A Science is a body of universal truths expressible in sentences which begins with whenever', if ever', any' and no,

‘A science is not interested in particulars but in general principles. A science enables us to make successful predictions and to control the future course of events in some measure.

A science is objective knowledge in the sense that every objective observer ought to accept it if the evidence were put before him, whatever his personal predictions or other circumstance may be.

Evidence to prove that History is Science

(1) **Collection of Facts and their interpretations:** History is scientific in nature because of the use of the method and technique involved. In the first place, history has its own methods and techniques and that fact cannot be denied for the conclusions (or explanations) that the historian arrives at by the examination of clearly defined subject matter. That subject matter is the actions and sufferings of human beings in the past. This is done according to rules, methods and techniques which successive generations of historians have proven to be accurate. The ability of the historian to deal with materials which they study is entirely different from that of the ordinary man. The historian first collects his facts, then interprets them. It was assumed without question that this was also the method of science. It was this method of collecting and interpreting historical materials that Bury in Walsh (1951) evidently had in mind when, in closing words of his inaugural lecture of January 1903, he described history as science, no more no less. Collingwood was not left out in this debate of history being science or art. His writing in 1930s was particularly anxious to draw a sharp line between the world of nature which was the object of scientific inquiry and the world of history and during this period Bury's dictum was rarely quoted except in terms of derision. In his own contribution, Collingwood (1964) said:

History then is a science of a special kind. It is a science whose business is to study events not accessible to our observations, and to study these events inferentially. The historian calls the events in which he is interested.

Modern physicist constantly tells us that what they investigate are not facts, but events. The historian has some excuse for feeling himself more at home in the world of science today than he could have done a hundred years ago. The most striking point in comparing the production of historian with those of the natural scientist is that the former are intelligible to persons with no professional training whilst the latter are full of technicalities which cannot be understood except by the experts. Yet the layman can test the specialized technique of the historian by attempting to make an intelligible whole out of documents dealing with Nigerian civil war. Such will be shocked at the simple errors that the professional historian will point out. On that note, therefore, history can be described as scientific because anyone who hopes to be proficient in it must recognize its methods. But from the fact that history is written in every language, having developed no special vocabulary of its own, it does not follow that any fool can write it.

The status of the hypothesis used by the historian in the process of his inquiry seems remarkably similar to that of the hypotheses used by the scientists. Anyone who doubts that and thinks that history is an affair of common sense and nothing else may be invited to put its operation to a practical test: to say, a collection of documents dealing with the origin of the first world war and construct on that basis, a history of the event which led to it. He will be surprised and shocked at the simplicities in his thinking which any professional historian will point out.

In that manner, history could be a science or an empirical discipline because it shares certain characteristics and methods of inquiry with the physical science like observation, classification, framing and testing of hypothesis. It is in consonance with this historian like Maurice Mandelbaum in Flump (1909) assert thus:

The historian uses method which is analogous to those of comparative anatomy. As the anatomist reconstructs an animal from a few bones, so can the historian reconstruct the life of the monastery from the ruins of a building, the tools and broken pottery found on the ground and perhaps a list of monies paid out by the monks during a certain period of time. Or the historian may throw light on an evolutionary series as the biologist does a species of animal.

I propose therefore to take it that history can be described as scientific in one respect at any rate, namely that it is a study with its own recognized methods which must be mastered by anyone who hope to be proficient at it.

- (2) **Through careful predictions:** Another area to be considered is the role of history in prediction. This is another area of controversy if history is not science in the formulation of scientific laws since there are no general laws in history. Scientific knowledge often provides itself with the power of prediction, the historian cannot predict future. Historian is concerns with the past, he may as a result of his professionalism, make some intelligent predictions about the present and future, but that is not strictly the business of the historian. Surely, it is not absurd to maintain that we study the past because we think the study will illuminate the present, and should not be so. If the past were utterly irrelevant to the present should we take any interest in it at all?

For instance, someone with knowledge of Nigerian history is in better position to say (in some respects) how Nigeria will develop in the future than the one without such knowledge. If two or three children in a school develop measles, one will conclude the epidemics will spread; and this prediction, is based on a generalization from past experience and is a valid and useful guide to action. But an individual cannot make a specific prediction that Charles or Marry will catch measles. The historian proceeds in the same way. Though the historian can draw such lessons, he cannot make explicit generalizations. His conclusions are particular and not general and when he makes general statements they face limitations. Although popular statements like “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, which is credited to Lord Acton, are some sometimes found in history (and have been proven to be true) they are not focus of the historian. (Hook, 1953)

It has been said that whilst it is certainly not the business of historians to predict the future, it is very much their business to retrospect the past; to establish on the basis of present evidence, what the past must have been like; and it is argued that the procedure of the historian in retrospecting is exactly parallel to that of the scientist in predicting, since in each case the argument proceeds from the general truth.

Scientists are interested in general truths and they do make it their business to predict. Historians, by way of retrospection are primarily occupied with individual events, and

seldom give expression that is truly universal in conclusion in the course of their work. However, both use procedures that are parallel

- (3) **Through Archeological Study:** History is also scientific through archeological study. Archeology is the study of the ancient remains left behind by men in form of human bones, skulls, plates and other ornaments. It provides information or evidence for those periods where there is no written history. Excavation is the principal method of investigation used by archaeologist to disclose all the evidence provided by the burial remains (Fadeiye, 1986). The archeologist conducts excavation through careful digging since the objects are fragile to avoid their destruction. Excavation through careful digging into the soil is scientific in nature by the archaeologist. The objects are taken to the laboratory where they are analysed and interpreted to know the times and history of those who made them. They try to date objects through the following methods, stratigraphy and radio-carbon dating. All these methods adopted by archaeologist in excavation is scientific in nature and not ordinary digging except someone who is an expert. It is on this basis that one will say history is science.
- (4) **Positivism and Darwinian Theories:** The theories of positivism and Darwinism say that history is science. According to positivism, history an oiler that connected body of knowledge methodically and what it arrived at is a science, but a science of particular kind. It is not abstract but a concrete science, and it terminates not in general knowledge but in knowledge of individual truth (Marwick, 1976). One of the primary aims of positivism in most of its forms has been to vindicate the unity of science. History cannot divorce from science, it is sciences. It shows that, apart from being purely analytic disciplines like mathematics and formal logic, all branches of knowledge which deserve names depends on the same basic procedure of observation, conceptual reflection and verification. Against this, it is contended that procedure in history does not differ in principle from that of natural science. In each case, conclusions are reached by appeal to general truths with slit variation

On the side of Darwin's Theory, he made another scientific revolution, taking his cue from biology, Darwin began to think of society as an organism, but the real importance of the Darwin revolution was that, Darwin was completing what Lyell had already began in geology, brought in history into science. Science was no longer concerned with something static and timeless, but a process of change and development. Evolution in science confirmed and complemented progress in history. Nothing will alter this inductive view of historical method, first is to collect your facts, and then interpret them. It was assumed without objection that this was all the method of science.

Conclusion

One will conclude that history is a body of knowledge acquired as result of an attempt to study a certain subject matter in a methodical way with guiding principle. This method and principle are also applicable to those in the sciences. The only thing that is difference is the approach. Though for history to be fully integrated into the sciences, the limitation of the study of history has to be considered such as interpretation of historical data, propaganda, selections, language barrier and problem of prejudice etc, if the historian can eradicate this problems, then history can take its proper position in sciences.

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