

OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN HISTORY, PART-1

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INTRODUCTION

The controversy as to whether or not historical truth is objective is as old as the profession itself. However the issue became a hotly debated point of contention only after German philosopher, Ranke, openly and confidently declared that truth in history was not only objective but achievable. Though initially Ranke's argument found great support from historians all over Europe, and the United States as well, however by the beginning of the 20th century skepticism began to be raised among philosophers and philosophically minded historians on the accuracy of historical accounts written by historians. One of the reasons for this skepticism was the belief that historical explanation

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was not based on any empirical or scientific methods but rather expressed by the historian based on his personal assumption of what could possibly have happened. As such, it was argued that historical truth could at best be true only relative to the values and needs of the time of the historian who writes it. Due to their emphasis on relativism these critics later came to be referred as Relativists. The debate between the Relativists and those who staunchly believe that history is objective and achievable continues to this day.

In the Preface of his first major work, *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations from 1494 to 1514 (1824)*, Ranke wrote that the job of the historian is to present the past as it had actually happened.

To achieve this he had outlined several guidelines that a historian has to adhere to while writing history such as

- using only validated facts and ridding oneself of prejudices and moral judgments against the object that was investigated.
- lamented that in the past history was diverted from its actual purpose and had been used to judge the past so that the future generation would benefit from that. This, Ranke argued, was not the job of history or historians.
- He cautioned historians against allowing their own judgments in recreating the past lest the degree of objectivity in their work would be compromised.
- He stressed that only when a historian removed all traces of his personal feelings and opinions could he ever produce an objective historical work .

Ranke advocated this view in the first quarter of the 19th century. Since Ranke's view had created a strong impact among historians sometimes it is mistakenly assumed that the effort to write objective history began only since the time of Ranke. But, this is not correct. Actually, the yearning to write objective history had always been a practice among historians since the time of *Herodotus* itself.

- Herodotus travelled to almost all the countries involved in the Persian War, including the countries of enemies, and interviewed as many witnesses as possible to ensure that facts presented in his Persian Wars were accurate.
- He had used some kind of critical analysis to ascertain that the information given by the witnesses was true and correct

Thucydides, who had actually received inspiration to write history from *Herodotus*, had also tried to write objective history.

- His work, the Peloponnesian War, was a documentation of a contemporary incident, the Greek civil war, fought by Athens and its empire against the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta.
- *Thucydides* chose to write the history of contemporary incident because he felt historians can vouch for objectivity only for contemporary occurrences. He took pain to seek not only as much facts as possible but also to ensure that the facts were true .

- His ingenuity in evidence-gathering, ascertaining the accuracy of the gathered facts and analyzing the cause and effect of the Peloponnesian War without reference to intervention of the gods had made Thucydides to be regarded as the father of scientific history .
- *Ibnu Khaldun*, the Muslim scholar who had lived in the 14th century, had argued that unless historians adhere to strict professional ethics it was not possible to write objective history. In the *Muqaddimah*, he criticizes the works of several Muslim scholars as lacking in objectivity as they had deviated from the basic principles of history writing.

- He also, like Ranke, had proposed several principles to be followed by historians to produce objective historical works .

Thus, it is clear that the concept of objectivity and the urge to write objective truth had already existed among historians since before the times of Ranke. However, it was only when Ranke endeavored to promote a scientific method to write objective history among historians controversy arose as to whether history was objective or not. Actually, initially the idea proposed by Ranke succeeded in attracting a large number of historians. Since the mid-nineteenth century, efforts were taken to train historians on the art of writing objective history.

Ranke created a scientific model to train aspiring historians in the field of critical Objectivity in History research methods. University students from the United States, for example, had travelled to Germany to study Rankean methods of writing objective history. And, as a recognition of his contributions towards writing objective history, Ranke was appointed as the honorary member of the American Historical Association. In fact, Ranke was the first to be accorded this honour. However, Ranke's influence began to be challenged since the beginning of the 20th century. Although it is more than a century since this controversy came to the fore, and has been argued out by

scholars from both sides of the divide, nonetheless, the issue remains unresolved as ever to this day. American historians, like *Carl Becker* and *Charles Beard*, began to question the ability of historians to write history that could ever be called objective. They argued that there was no absolute truth in history, rather what was presented by historians was their own version of the actual event and that could at best be true only relative to the prevailing needs of the time of the historians. This group came to be known as *Relativist* later for their staunch believe in relativism .

Similarly, the defenders of objectivity were began to be referred as *Objectivists*. The view of the Relativists sparked a heated debate among scholars not only from the field of history but also philosophy.

The Relativists Argument Skepticism against objectivity in history began to gain momentum in the United States, since the 1920s, when Carl Becker and Charles Beard started questioning the ability of historians to recreate an event as it had actually happened. To the Relativists, historical interpretation had always been and for various technical reasons shall always remain relative to the historian's time place and purposes.

In his address entitled "What are Historical Facts" at the American Historical Association, in 1926, Becker argued that it was impossible for any historian to present history, even for a simple incident, as it had actually happened. According to Becker, historian chooses what he prefers based on his experience and knowledge and the need of his time and presents that as history. As such, different historians investigating the same event shall come up with different histories as the experience and knowledge and preferences of the historians differ. In short, no history shall be the same for two historians. And, as the values of the society changes with time every generation shall rewrite its history according to the needs of the time. With this argument, Becker, emphatically disagreed that history could ever be objective.

In 1933, in his presidential address entitled "Written History as an Act of Faith" at the American Historical Association, Beard concurred with the arguments of Becker. Beard argued that history was the thought of the present time about the past. He compared history with natural sciences and claimed that unlike in physics or biology where the reality could be presented objectively without any external influences history just reflects the thoughts of the historian who writes it. One of the main reasons for this, he argued, was the inability of the historian to completely detach himself from the object he investigates .

To put it in a nutshell, Beard argues that the actual reality does not exist for anyone to rewrite it or make an interpretation on how such and such thing had happened. The historian using whatever traces of that reality that is left behind to reconstruct what he believed could have happened. In doing so the historian visualizes the past based on his experience and knowledge and recreates a history that suits the demands of the present. Hence, history is nothing but an interpretation of the past in terms of the need of the present. Based on this arguments Beard drew the conclusion that objective truth in history could never be known. Perhaps, Becker and Beard were the earliest scholars to have openly challenged the optimism created by Ranke among historians towards writing objective history.

(To be continued)