

**POINT OF VIEW
IN THE
WRITING OF HISTORY**

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First published in 1981 by
THE CHAPELFIELDS PRESS
P.O. Box 104
Coventry CV5 8NE

ISBN: 0 86279 009 3

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Printed for the account of the Chapelfields Press by
Coventry Printers
Curriers Close Industrial Estate
Canley
Coventry CV4 8AW

The concept of point of view is a part of the 'theory of knowledge' and is easily outlined and understood. Factual statements in a text, such as a work of history, are transmitted by way of the knowledge and perception of the facts as a whole held by the author or authors of the text: knowledge, in that a particular historian, biographer or geographer will remain ignorant of certain data; perception, in that she or he will make certain political and social assumptions about the data which are used, and will also select which pieces of information, known or discovered by research, to include and which to exclude according to a personal value-judgment on their 'relevance'. Therefore any work of history, by its ignorance, its assumptions and its selectivity, represents the point of view, personality and politics of its author: objective (or unbiased) historiography is not possible. A well-known unconventional right-wing historian embroidered this idea thus:

History is . . . necessarily subjective and individual, conditioned by the interest and vision of the historian. His interest if intense and sincere is contagious, and the test of his originality is whether it is convincing; . . .¹

One cannot judge history in terms of 'truth': interest and sincerity are better touchstones.

These self-evident, and indeed commonplace, outlines are, however, contested by a number of historians, almost exclusively of a conventional (traditionalist and nationalist) right-wing kind, at a practical level: they see only irrelevant philosophical niceties in the question of point of view and insist on the *need* for objectivity, scholarly consensus and

(often) the avoidance of moral involvement in historical writing.² It is fairly clear why they take this view. They have a strong interest in maintaining the *status quo* — in the study of society, in the places where society is studied, and in the society itself. They wish to represent the *status quo* as the only reasonable way of proceeding, and to discredit its opponents.³ Most of the history that has been written up to now, and this is markedly true of English-language history, has been written by people of their opinions, and they wish to portray this orthodox conservative and largely dominant historiography (which almost totally dominates British schooling and largely dominates British university teaching) as not merely correct but objective, and so to be able to represent left-wing, and indeed all socially-concerned historiography (thus including gentle liberals like John and Barbara Hammond or R. H. Tawney) as 'ideological'. Students learn at the feet of conservative nationalist historians, the majority, that conservative nationalist historical writing is impartial, and that left-wing historians, the minority (but including such fine writers as C. L. R. James, Eugene Genovese, E. P. Thompson or Gareth Stedman Jones), are ideologically committed and predisposed, and therefore not to be taken seriously. This prevailing view (left-wingers as ideologues, right-wingers as practical and objective) is not, of course, limited to historiography.⁴

An assessment of point of view in the writing of history requires a rejection of this partial view of ideology and becomes the assessment of the expressed and implicit ideologies of all historians. For this purpose, they can be regarded as two main camps: those historians who write in a manner fundamentally sympathetic to the rulers, and those who write in a manner fundamentally sympathetic to the ruled. E. H. Carr is right to advise "Study the historian before you begin to study the facts".⁵ All historians have sympathies which are, ultimately, political points of view. Thus it is significant that J. H. Plumb should sympathise with Sir Robert Walpole's difficulties in managing his governments, while E. P. Thompson finds 'the great man' evil and contemptible; that Norman Gash sympathises with Lord Liverpool and with Peel, and Robert Blake sympathises with Disraeli; that G. R. Elton venerates Britain's great past⁶; that 'old school' writers like Arthur Bryant, A. L. Rowse or E. L. Woodward express a general sympathy for 'natural rulers';⁷ or that Albert Soboul should sympathise with Saint-Just and Robespierre, while Daniel Guérin sympathises with the *bras-armés*. More broadly, for traditional historians the period 1300-1750 was one of great men and great developments in Europe, whereas for post-war French historians like Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Fernand Braudel, who strive to understand the point of view of the mass of the people, it was essentially a period of stasis when nothing whatsoever changed. Then, in a different but equally broad disagreement, a certain sort of left-wing historian is concerned to emphasise history's predetermined, necessitarian nature, while a certain sort of right-wing historian is concerned to emphasise the accidental (Cleopatra's nose, Napoleon's ples) aspect of the way things happened. (There is no need to discuss in detail here the respective futilities of these two approaches.)

These are examples of historians taking up their political positions.⁸ History is not a matter of empirical facts being first described and then interpreted; it is a matter of selected

data about the past being described *through* an ideological position. In the writing of history, the facts can never be 'primary': the historian's political point of view comes into play as soon as reflection upon any topic begins, and is in play before the pen touches the paper on any project.

The work of any historian will be judged on three levels. At a first (and trivial) level, the facts used will be judged to be accurate or inaccurate. (If the facts are persistently inaccurate, the writer will be judged to be not a historian at all.) At a second level, the criteria for the selection of the facts will be judged: the subject should be coherent; relevant data should not have been excluded. And at a third level, the interpretation of the facts will be judged, as to whether it is lucidly deduced, well-expressed and politically acceptable to the reader (as, for example, the opinions which motivate much of the writing of Elton and Rowse, cited in footnotes 6 and 7, are unacceptable, nay repugnant, to me).

Politically acceptable. To understand what a particular historian is saying, it is necessary to try to place that historian in the political spectrum that runs from G. Kitson Clark and A. L. Rowse on the far right, through J. H. Plumb and J. H. Hexter on the centre right, and E. H. Carr and Asa Briggs on the centre left, to Eric Hobsbawm, John Saville and John Foster in various branches of the far left. One will not then be able to say, to return to the example of Walpole⁹, that Plumb's view of him is correct and Thompson's view incorrect, or vice-versa. But it will be possible to make a judgment, and to decide where one stands. Most of the debates and disagreements within English historiography are traceable back to the differing politics of the historians involved. So readers of history should learn how to align themselves within the frameworks of these disagreements — through a constant awareness of their own political preferences and of the politics (explicit or implied) of the historian whose work they are reading. For every act of writing history and every act of reading history is a political act.¹⁰

¹ L. B. Namier: *Avenues of History* (1952), p. 8.

² The case is argued in philosophical terms in C. Blake: "Can History be Objective?", *Mind* 64 (1955), pp. 61-78, and in books and essays by Ernest Nagel. Conservative historians supporting an 'objectivist' or 'empiricist' line (with a heavy emphasis on the word 'facts', and perhaps reference to the works of Karl Popper) have included Maurice Mandelbaum, Herbert Butterfield, G. N. Clark, G. Kitson Clark, A. L. Rowse, J. H. Hexter, and, most vehemently, G. R. Elton. Anyone who is persuaded by section II of his *The Practice of History* (1967) that Professor Elton is himself an 'objective' historian may be disabused by reading his extraordinary introduction to *Crime in England, 1550-1800* ed. J. S. Cockburn (1977).

³ Let us emphasise the point in a footnote: The pursuit of objectivity is closely linked with the desire to defend and maintain the *status quo*.

⁴ It is, for instance, the view of the Labour Party propagated by the BBC departments of News and Current Affairs. Cf. University of Glasgow Media Group: *More Bad News* (1980).

⁵ E. H. Carr: *What is History?* (Pelican ed., 1964), p. 23.

⁶ "There is still a great deal to be said for living in this country, and the historian's task consists among other things, if I may so put it, in a crude re-kindling of a certain respect for a country whose past justifies that respect." G. R. Elton: *The Future of the Past* (1968), p. 22.

⁷ "All organisms are engaged in the struggle for survival: it is enough that the fittest should survive with some consideration for others." A. L. Rowse, writing about "the rulers of Elizabethan London", *History Today* 28 (1978), p. 485.

⁸ The classic political debate amongst historians is the 'standard of living controversy' over what happened to the lives of ordinary people during, and as a result of, the Industrial Revolution. The left, from Engels to John Foster, and championed by Eric Hobsbawm, claims a disastrous deterioration. The right, from Sir John Clapham and T. S. Ashton to Duncan Bythell, and championed by R. M. Hartwell, claims a steady improvement. (E. P. Thompson has suggested a quantitative steady improvement accompanied by a qualitative disastrous deterioration.) Despite the taking up of increasingly subtle positions, this debate remains one where the historians' political affiliations are brought to the foreground.

⁹ I am not suggesting that it is particularly important to hold strong views in a debate on 'Walpole: for and against'. I do believe that history is purposeless unless it involves passing definite moral judgments on the past which can inform the present and the future, but the moral judgments can more usefully concern social groupings and systems than highly-placed individuals. Thompson is very probably right in underlining Walpole's vindictiveness and rapaciousness. But were Harley, Stanhope, Sunderland, Aislabie, Townshend or Carteret 'better' men? Cf. P. Anderson: *Arguments within English Marxism* (1980), p. 94.

¹⁰ The self-styled 'liberal democrat' historian Geoffrey Best havers towards a similar conclusion in his inaugural lecture *History, Politics and the Universities* (1969).