

Is History a Science?

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Abstract:

Science enjoyed considerable prestige during the nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly, historians began to think about the relationship between history and science. This was a source of heated debate. The central question was, "is history a science?" Two schools of thought, positivism and idealism emerged and sought to address whether human events and activities should be studied in the same way as natural phenomena. This paper explores the characteristics of these two schools of thought. Positivists vaunted the applicability of scientific methods to the study of history. The chief exponents of this view, Auguste Comte, Thomas Buckle, and J.B Bury advocated that human events are the same as natural phenomena. Historians need to deploy scientific methods and techniques in order to understand the processes that govern them. Idealists, on the other hand, stressed that history is an autonomous and distinctive field of inquiry. The chief exponent of the idealist position was R.G Collingwood. He maintained that all history is the history of thought. The historian's chief task is the reenactment in his or her own mind of the thoughts and intentions of individuals in the past. This implies an overreliance on imagination, intuition, and empathy. Historical knowledge is therefore subjective.

Keywords: science, history, positivism, idealism, the nineteenth century.

Introduction

In his infamous Rede lecture of 1959, entitled “The two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution,” the British scientist and novelist Charles Percy Snow pinpointed that there is a gulf between “two cultures,” the arts or the humanities and science. He explained that Western intellectuals were gradually polarized into two polar groups: literary intellectuals and scientists. Most importantly, there existed “a gulf of mutual incomprehension sometimes... hostility and dislike but most of all lack of understanding” between the two (Snow 4). Snow expressed concern about this widening schism between the humanities and science and emphasized the necessity of closing the gap between these two separate worlds. Historians have long been aware of the existing gulf between history and science.

A heated debate arose in the nineteenth century about the nature of history and its relationship with natural sciences. Newton’s and Galileo’s scientific laws unlocked the secrets of the natural world. They represented the capstone of the scientific revolution. As a result, historians began to think about the relationship between history and science and there was an increasing preoccupation with extending the scientific methods and laws of the natural sciences to the study of history. The exponents of this approach, the positivists, maintained that human events are the same as the natural phenomena and scientific methods are to be deployed to understand and explain human experience.

The French social theorist and philosopher Auguste Comte and his historiographical followers, Henry Thomas Buckle and John Bagnell Bury affirmed the status of history as a science. They asserted that this would contribute to its triumph and prestige. Idealists, on the other hands, maintained that history is an autonomous and distinctive field of inquiry. Historical knowledge is fundamentally different from knowledge about the natural world. This paper seeks to uncover the characteristics of positivism and idealism and their impact on the study of history. The intense debate that arose between the two schools of thought highlights one of the earliest attempts to raise history to the rank of science as well as the differences between scientific and historical knowledge.

1- The Positivist View of History

Positivism was founded by the French philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte (1798-1857). In his *Positive Philosophy*, Comte outlined the main tenets of his positivist philosophy. He asserted that the only way to obtain accurate knowledge of the world is through the application of the methods of the natural sciences. Knowledge comes from observation which implies a reliance on sense perception and experience. In this respect, positivism has close resemblance to the Empiricist tradition. It refutes all knowledge that goes beyond any possible evidence. By implication, positivism is based on a rejection of metaphysics and theology which were considered intuitive and therefore unscientific (Comte 44-45).

Comte advocated that the methods of the natural sciences should be applied to men and their societies. This strict adherence to the positive method in the study of human society was a reaction to the social and political upheaval of the French Revolution. The latter also coincided with a growing antagonism between France and its neighbors mainly Britain

(Tripathi). France was a staunch supporter of the American war of independence against British rule. These tensions culminated in the Napoleonic Wars which caused grinding poverty and unemployment in both British and French societies. This distress and widespread upheaval in France had a significant impact on Comte's philosophy of positivism. The French philosopher sought to create an ordered society based on scientific methods. Emmett Kennedy commented on Comte's aim to get rid of the chaos caused by metaphysical speculation and religious superstition:

The absence of any integrated, organic culture after the disorder that followed the Enlightenment and the Revolution indicated to Auguste Comte the deep malaise that beset French society. The organic worldview of medieval Christianity had been disturbed. ... He approached the problems of society with reason alone; in that he was a philosopher. But he wrote from ... the side that had learned the cost of corrosive criticism. (Kennedy 140)

Central to Comte's positivist philosophy is his law of the three stages. He emphasized that there are three stages of development through which all civilizations pass; the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive. The first stage explains natural phenomena by acknowledging supernatural forces. The metaphysical stage is a slight departure from the theological stage. It relies on abstract rational principles. The positive stage is the pinnacle of human development. It represents the scientific mode of thinking (Acton 3). Obviously, it is the opposite of the other two preceding stages and relies on scientific methods and laws to explain all phenomena.

This law of the three stages is inextricably connected with Comte's hierarchical classification of the sciences. The French philosopher emphasized that scientific knowledge passes through similar stages of development, from the abstract and simple to the concrete and complex (Cogswell 494). Every science receives the laws which render its existence possible from the sciences which have preceded it (ibid). The six sciences of the evolution of thought developed as follows: mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology and finally sociology (Simonton 1). The latter refers to the scientific study of society.

In this respect, Comte maintained that human society can be studied in the same manner as the natural sciences. By following a positivist approach, historians would uncover the laws that govern human activities. Comte's positivist approach had a profound influence on historiography. One of the chief proponents of the positivist approach to history is the British amateur historian Thomas Buckle who came to be known as the "father" of scientific history.

According to him, Comte "was not only the greatest writer on the philosophy of method in our time" but he "had done more than any other to raise the standard of history itself" (Hesketh 17). Buckle's multi-volume book *History of Civilization in England* started to appear in 1857. From the outset, he expressed his desire to write a history that is subject to general laws:

I hope to accomplish for the history of man something equivalent, or at all events analogous to what has been effected by other inquirers for the different branches of natural science. In regard to nature, events apparently the most irregular capricious

have been explained, and have been shown to be in accordance with certain fixed and universal laws. (Buckle 5)

He pointed out that historians need to discover the regularities of human actions which are governed by mental and physical laws. This means that there can be no history without the natural sciences. For example, he emphasized that the science of the statistics was particularly adequate for uncovering history's regularities. He was highly influenced by the statistical method of the Belgian Adolphe Quetelet (1796-1874) who was in the words of Ian Hacking, "the greatest regularity salesman of the nineteenth century" (Hesketh 20). This quest for fixed laws would endow historical knowledge with objectivity.

Buckle's positivist approach is intimately linked to the notion of progress. He claimed that the scientific status of history ultimately leads to progress. Buckle noted that England, where scientific knowledge prevailed, reached the pinnacle of advancement. It comes as no surprise that he asserted that the value of the history of any nation can be determined only with reference to England (ibid 18). As a result, this progress would stop in the absence of a scientific approach to history (ibid). Another basic feature of Buckle's positivist approach is his indictment of theology. He professed that the predominance of theology was a serious obstacle to the writing of scientific history. He stressed that it was impossible to make history a true science in view of the widespread belief that the affairs of men were governed by mysterious and providential forces. Ultimately, this would make men reject all scientific methods and explanations (ibid).

Like Buckle, the Irish historian John Bagnell Bury (1861-1921) called for the application of scientific methods to the study of past events. Bury was a philologist who became a historian. His works covered the late Roman period and the Byzantine Empire. He was also the editor of *The Cambridge Ancient History*. In 1902, he succeeded Lord Acton as the Regius professor of modern history at Cambridge and delivered a lecture about the scientific status of history. He rejected earlier definitions of history as a branch of literature.

In his inaugural address as Regius Professor at Cambridge "The Science of History," he declared that "history is a science, no less, no more" (Bury 4). For Bury and other positivist historians the main task of the historian is the gathering of ascertainable facts. Through the meticulous observation of facts and the regularities in these observations, the historian would discover general laws of human development. History is thus based on generalizations. By using scientific methods such as induction, the historian would attain absolute objectivity and elevate history to the status of the natural sciences.

Positivist historical knowledge is therefore based on the application of scientific methods to the study of human events. The historian's chief task is to amass facts and generate laws. On this basis, positivism spurred the growth of a new kind of history marked by detailed historical facts. This new kind of history casts aside the subjective element in historical knowledge. Idealists reacted against this positivist emphasis on facts and the application of empirical methods to history. They stressed that history is a distinctive field of inquiry that has its own methods and that the generalizations of the natural sciences are not applicable to the study of history.

2. The Idealist View of History

The chief exponent of the idealist position is the philosopher and historian Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943). He indicted the positivist or scientific approach to history and maintained that history and the natural sciences are distinct fields of inquiry. He contended that human activities cannot be studied in the same manner as natural processes. In other words, natural sciences are perceived as monothetic, concerned with the systematic search for general laws of the nonhuman world. History on the other hand is idiographic. It aims to understand human events which are unique and non-repeatable (Horn 431).

Accordingly, Collingwood defended the autonomy of history by stressing the fact that the scientific methods of empirical sciences based on observations and then generalizations by induction are not applicable to the study of history. In his pamphlet of 1930, *The Philosophy of History*, Collingwood defended the individuality of history which centers on the individual fact instead of the general laws (150). He indicted Buckle's and other positivist historians' attempts to elevate history to the status of the natural sciences by extracting general laws from it (ibid). In his analysis of the idealist view of history, George Albert Wells pointed out that Collingwood considered that positivists have a poor knowledge of history (84). Besides, he acknowledged that Comte's sociology "was only history in which it didn't matter whether the facts were right or wrong, in other words it was science and not history at all" (ibid).

Collingwood emphasized that history is not concerned with the formulation or discovery of historical laws or general laws. According to him, all history is the history of thought and the historian's main task is to re-enact in his own mind the thoughts and intentions of individuals in the past (Tosh 110). The chief difference between history and the natural science was the fact that scientists can always reproduce the facts under their own eyes (Collingwood 132). These are empirical facts, "something immediately given in perception" (ibid).

While scientific knowledge is based on the observation of perceived facts, the events that the historian studies, on the other hand, have both an "outside" or "observable" part and an "inside", which is commonly discovered by the historian's mind. That is, while the "outside" part of the historical event can be observed and therefore perceived by our senses, the "inside" aspect of historical events cannot be perceived and requires re-enacting or rethinking the thoughts of individuals in the past. Collingwood explained:

The historian investigating any event in the past makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and the inside of an event. By the outside of the event I mean everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements, the passage of Caesar, so accompanied by certain men, across a river called the Rubicon at one date, or the spilling of his blood on the floor of the senate house at another. By the inside of the event I mean that in it which can only be described in terms of thought, Caesar's defiance of Republican Law or the clash of constitutional policy between himself and his assassins.(Collingwood 213)

The historian needs therefore to rely on his imagination. In other words, in his interpretation of past events, the historian needs to understand and reconstruct them. Thus, historians became engaged in a process that Collingwood called re-enactment that is,

understanding and exploring historical facts intuitively. Collingwood wanted to “look inside the agent’s mind to detect thoughts occurring there” (Nielson 31). It follows then that scientific history is not about generalizing laws but about rethinking past thoughts. The past is not something foreign that can be observed but it is inside the historian’s mind (Stauss 560).

It is clear therefore that there are fundamental differences between positivist and idealist historical knowledge. Positivist historians defined history as a science and insisted that the methods of the natural sciences need to be used for history. The proper work of the historian is to generate historical laws through the amassing of facts and observation of the regularities governing human events. As a result, the historian would attain absolute objectivity and history would be on an equal footing with the natural sciences.

Idealists, on the other hand, argued that natural sciences and history are fundamentally different and should be dealt with using different methods. Collingwood particularly emphasized the autonomous character of history and the historian’s role in explaining the “outside” and “inside” nature of human events which can only be discovered through rethinking the thoughts of historical agents. This implies a reliance on intuition and empathy in order to understand the unique events of the past.

Both the positivist and idealist views of history stimulated much criticism. In his article “The Historian and his Facts”, Edward Carr noted the unrivalled prestige which science enjoyed since the times of Newton and Galileo. This explains historians’ attempts to formulate the “Law of History” that is similar to the “Law of Evolution.” Carr criticized the positivists’ definition of history as a science and their insistence on the accumulation of facts. He explained that for positivists history is a corpus of ascertained facts that is claimed to lead to an objective historical knowledge.

On the contrary, Carr maintained that facts cannot be objective. Historians select what they deem as facts according to their own biases and agendas. For instance, the crossing of millions of people of the Rubicon was not considered a worthy subject of historical research while Julius Caesar’s crossing of the same river is considered to be an important “historical fact.” Positivist history is therefore selective and never neutral.

Similarly to Carr, Friedrich Nietzsche rejected the positivists’ emphasis on the objectivity of facts. Against the positivist claim that there are only facts, he replied: “there are no facts at all, only interpretations” (Nietzsche 139). In the late nineteenth century, positivism was largely discredited (Horn 439). It paved the way however to a new generation of positivists who studied history through “the correct application of generalizations derived from other disciplines supposedly based on scientific method such as economics, sociology, and psychology”(Tosh 110). This use of the methods and concepts of other disciplines led to the development of interdisciplinary history.¹

¹ Interdisciplinary history became popular in the 1960s and gained professional acceptance with the founding of the Journal of Interdisciplinary History in 1970. The work of Karl Lamprecht in Germany, Henri Berr in France, and James Harvey Robinson in the United States reacted against the belief that history is an autonomous field of inquiry that has its own distinctive methods. They insisted that history must borrow from other fields mainly from the social sciences such as psychology: See Horn, “Interdisciplinary History”, 431.

Collingwood's philosophy of history has been criticized for its exaggerated emphasis on unique events. William Henry Walsh maintained that Collingwood's approach to history "overlooks the part played by general (universal) propositions in all thinking, including historical thing" (Van der Dussen 118). Collingwood's definition of history as the history of thought has overly limited the scope of the subject (Tosh 110). Moreover, his emphasis on the historian's ability to rethink the past thought of historical agents has been questioned.

According to Walsh, "there is all the difficulty, in any case, of knowing how I am to get at the actual thought of past ages, to put myself in a position to rethink precisely the same acts" (154). That is, the historian does not have the ability to re-imagine the past thoughts and actions of historical agents in the present. Collingwood was also indicted for insisting on the relationship of history with other disciplines mainly the natural sciences and overlooking the nature of history itself (ibid). Furthermore, his concept of reenactment stimulated much criticism. It was seen as a simple act of intuition. Unsurprisingly, idealist historical knowledge was considered to be very mysterious and intuitive demanding mysterious methods that were considered incompatible with history (Gardiner 49).

Positivism and idealism represent then one of the most heated debates about the relationship of history and the natural sciences. Positivist historians defined history as a science in which historians amass a large number of facts, observe the regularities that govern them, and generalize laws. By following the methods of the empirical sciences, mainly observation, and the generalization of laws positivist historical knowledge would be objective. It was assumed that the historian did not pass judgment on facts. This would elevate history to the prestigious status of the natural sciences.

Idealists, on the other hand, maintained that human events cannot be studied in the same manner as natural processes. Robin George Collingwood, whom John Tosh called "the most original and sophisticated exponent of the idealist position," defined all history as the "history of thought." The historian, unlike the scientist, studies human events that cannot be explained through mere observation. He needs to rely on imagination and intuition in order to probe into his historical subject. Historical knowledge is thus subjective. This fervent debate about the use of the methods of the natural sciences in the study of history continued into the twentieth century with the birth of interdisciplinary history. The latter sought, in one way or another, to bridge the gap between history and scientific disciplines.

Despite attempts to bridge the gap between history and the natural sciences, there are still important differences between both of them. John Tosh identified some of the distinctive characteristics of historical knowledge. First of all, history allows for the use of imagination which enables historians to reconstruct past events for which they have no evidence (158). Tosh explains:

Whereas scientists can often create their own data by experiment, historians are time and again confronted by gaps in the evidence which they make good only by developing a sensitivity as to what might have happened, derived from an imagined picture that has taken shape in the course of becoming immersed in the surviving documentation. In all these ways imagination is vital to the historian. It not only generates fruitful hypotheses, it is also deployed in the reconstruction of past events and situations by which those hypotheses are tested. (ibid)

The second major difference has to do with the status of explanation within the two disciplines. Scientific explanations are commonly agreed upon. They represent “the nearest possible approximation to the truth and are commonly recognized as such” (Tosh 185). But history is open to multiple interpretations. The known historical facts are beyond doubt but their interpretations are often diverse. Rarely do historians arrive at consensus (ibid). For example, the industrial revolution is still open to different interpretations. Last but not least, the historian cannot escape his own prejudices and assumptions of his society (ibid). These characteristics of history explain, at least partly, the common view of history as inferior to the natural sciences. This debate about the relationship of history and the natural sciences uncovered one of the earliest backgrounds for the birth of interdisciplinary history.

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