

**The Fundamentals of History Author Professor Arthur Marwick  
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### **1. Definition of History**

Historians do not, as too many of my colleagues keep mindlessly repeating, "reconstruct" the past. What historians do is produce knowledge about the past, or, with respect to each individual, fallible historian, produce contributions to knowledge about the past. Thus the best and most concise definition of history is:

*The bodies of knowledge about the past produced by historians, together with everything that is involved in the production, communication of, and teaching about that knowledge.*

### **2. The Necessity for History**

...What happens in the present, and what will happen in the future, is very much governed by what happened in the past. It is obvious that knowledge of the past has not brought easy solutions to problems in, say, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, or Palestine. But without a thorough knowledge of past events and circumstances, we could not even attempt to grapple with these problems. Without knowledge of the past we would be without identity, we would be lost on an endless sea of time. The simplest answer to the questions "Why do history?" or "What is the use of history?" is: "Try to imagine what it would be like to live in a society where there was absolutely no knowledge of the past." The mind boggles. Of course, if history has this vital importance for society, then it must be as accurate as possible, it must be based on evidence and logical thought, not on specious theory or political ideology.

### **3. Other Justifications for History**

Those who study history, for career purposes, or just for personal enjoyment, have other reasons apart from this all-embracing justification for national resources being channeled into the study of history.

Many of us feel the almost poetic appeal of the past, have a passionate interest in finding out what really did happen in the past - practically all of the world's major tourist traps relate to the appeal of the past (the Tower of London, San Gimignano in Tuscany, Ephesus in Turkey). It is historians who provide the contextual knowledge that eventually works its way into the guide books, and again the need is for accuracy not specious theory.

Historians also provide the contextual knowledge for great works of art and literature, thus enhancing our enjoyment of these. In addition, the study of history offers to individuals major utilitarian learning outcomes. Training in history is training in analysing, evaluating, and interpreting both secondary and primary sources. It develops an understanding that everything written pertaining to history, secondary or primary, must be approached with scepticism and caution. It develops the ability to distinguish between pieces of writing which are well-substantiated and logical, and those which simply express theory, hypothesis, or opinion. The skills and learning outcomes rising from historical study are invaluable in a contemporary world which is dominated by information and communications. The methods and skills required of the historian, and, more important, the attitudes of mind transmitted in the teaching of history, are of vital importance in assessing and filtering the messages constantly battering against us. History also provides a training in the writing up of the results of one's researches, in the form of essays, reports, dissertations. What is essential in history is clear and effective communication, well structured, and written in precise and explicit language.

#### 4. The Subjectivity Question

Many who call themselves "historians" do, indeed, use "history" as a vehicle for expressing their own political commitment. That is sheer self-indulgence. History is a scholarly, not a political, activity, and while, as citizens, we certainly should act upon our political views, in writing history we have an absolute obligation to try to exclude them. Most historians, like, most scientists, are motivated by the urge to *find out*. Much nonsense is talked about historians inevitably being "subjective"; the real point is that, being mere human beings, they are "fallible", and subject to many kinds of career and social pressures, or indeed common incompetence. Historians do disagree with each other in their interpretations, as do scientists. **But history deals with human values, in a way the sciences do not**, so there is more scope for differences in evaluation. Historical evidence is fragmentary, intractable, and imperfect. Individual books and articles may clash with each other; there will always be areas where uncertainty persists, but steadily agreed knowledge emerges in the form of works of synthesis and high-quality textbooks. History, like the sciences, is a co-operative enterprise...

#### 5. History and the Past

**...we have to make a firm distinction between history as "the bodies of knowledge about the past produced by historians", and "the past" as "everything which actually happened, whether known, or written, about by historians or not".**

#### 6. Periodization

It follows from all of this that periodization, the dividing of the past up into the eras or periods, has no *a priori* existence. It is simply an analytical tool of historians. A periodization which makes sense for the West, will not make sense for Africa or Asia....

#### 7. Primary and Secondary Sources

The only way we can have knowledge of the past is through studying the relics and traces left by past societies, the primary sources. Primary sources, as it were, form the basic "raw material" of history; they are sources which came into existence within the period being investigated. The articles and books written up later by historians, drawing upon these primary sources, converting the raw material into history, are secondary sources (pedants insist on pointing out that secondary sources may become primary sources for still later historians, but this is a matter of such triviality as scarcely to be worth bothering about). The distinction between primary and secondary sources is a critical one, though no historian has ever pretended that it offers a magic key to the nature of historical study, or that primary sources have a necromantic potency denied to secondary ones.

**There is always some excitement about being in contact with a genuine primary source, but one will not learn very much from a single source.**

Reading through an edited selection of excerpts from primary sources will have the salutary effect of bringing one in contact with the thinking and language of past generations, but it will not amount to research. If the ordinary reader, or history student, wants to learn quickly about the role and status of women during the Renaissance, or about the causes of the First World War, they will be well advised to go to the secondary authorities, a knowledge of the principles of history being useful in separating out the more reliable from the less. But if you are planning to make an original contribution to historical knowledge, you are unlikely to make much of a stir if you stick strictly to other people's work, that is, the

secondary sources - to which, it should be stressed the research historian will frequently return throughout all stages of research and writing.

... Primary sources, numbingly copious in some areas, are scarce and fragmentary in others. Much has to be garnered indirectly and by inference. Historians do not rely on single sources, but are always seeking corroboration, qualification, correction; the production of history is very much a matter of accumulating details, refining nuances. The technical skills of the historian lie in sorting these matters out, in understanding how and why a particular source came into existence, how relevant it is to the topic under investigation, and, obviously, the particular codes or language in accordance with which the particular source came into being as a concrete artifact.

Philosophers, and others ignorant of history, get confused because they think "primary" means "more truthful", and "secondary" means "less truthful". That is not the distinction at all. A good secondary source will be as reliable as the historian can possibly make it. **Primary sources are full of prejudices and errors. They were not written to serve the interests of historians coming along later: they were written to serve the interests of those who created them, going about their own business...**

## 8. Witting and Unwitting Testimony

..."Witting" means "deliberate" or "intentional"; "unwitting" means "unaware" or "unintentional". "Testimony" means "evidence". Thus, "witting testimony" is the deliberate or intentional message of a document or other source; the "unwitting testimony" is the unintentional evidence (about, for example, the attitudes and values of the author, or about the "culture" to which he/she belongs) that it also contains. Actually, it is the writer, creator, or creators of the document or source who is, or are, intentional or unintentional, not the testimony itself, so these phrases are examples of a figure of speech, the transferred epithet, where the adjective, which strictly speaking should be applied to a person, is transferred to what the person produced - the phrase is all the more effective for that...

No one is more familiar than the historian with the problems of language to be encountered in primary sources, which abound in obscure technical terms, words and phrases which have changed their meanings over the centuries, attitudes and concepts which no longer exist today, and may be scarcely expressible in the language of today.

## 9. The Arts as Sources

It is fun, and it is becoming fashionable, for historians to work with novels, films, paintings, and even music. Doing this is not evidence of some superior virtue, or sensibility; in fact, most of what we know about most periods in the past will continue to come from the more conventional sources.

***Historians have had a habit of quoting odd lines from novels, as if these, in themselves, somehow provided some extra illumination. Worse, historians refer to characters in novels (or even films) as if they were real people.***

If cultural artifacts are to be used at all in serious historical writing (and I believe they should - they can be invaluable for attitudes, values, and quality of cultural life), they have to be used seriously. If one is going to refer to a novel or a film, one must provide the essential contextual information about the artifact, and its production and reception, to make the reference a genuine contribution to knowledge: one must provide a "Quintessential Summary" (nature of the artifact, authorial intentions, and so on).

**When the temptation comes to make use of some cultural artifact the crucial questions to ask are "Does it tell us anything we didn't know already?", and, more probingly, "Does it tell us anything we couldn't discover more readily from another source?"**

Novels have sometimes been used as sources for living conditions and standards, as paintings of domestic scenes have sometimes been used as sources for what people ate. But it is far better to go directly to the actual statistics of wage rates and to social investigations for the first topic, and to household accounts, statistics of retail sales and so on for the latter one. *A painting of eighteenth-century French peasants consuming bread, garlic and wine may be evidence of their regular diet, but there is always the quite strong possibility that the artist might have been more concerned with infusing his painting with the religious symbolism of the Last Supper than with accurate sociological observation...*

## **10. Writing History**

We expect novelists, poets, and playwrights to exploit the ambiguities and resonances of language, even, perhaps, to express directly the dictates of the unconscious, not always logical in its choice of words.

Historians, on the other hand, should convey their findings as clearly and explicitly as possible. Some metaphors may be an aid to communication, others will simply contribute to confusion and obfuscation. With all the temptations to indulge in metaphor and rhetoric, cliché, sloppy phrasing and slang, getting it right is fiendishly difficult. Two essential injunctions are: "reflect" and "revise". What is it you really want to say? Is precise explication really assisted by phrases like, "webs of meaning", "cultural scripts", "discursive domains"? Revise, not to achieve elaborate literary effect, but to convey precisely what you mean to the reader.

**An exact, uncluttered style is essential to historical communication, it is not an extra; and if the style can be elegant (which is very different from being elaborate or rhetorical) so much the better. Sentiment is not enough in historical writing, what is needed is *thought*.**

## **Conclusion**

**At its very core history must be a scholarly discipline, based on thorough analysis of the evidence, and in the writing up of which language is deployed with the utmost precision. There must be constant awareness of the methods and principles of that discipline, constant attention to how it is taught, and how, at different levels, it is communicated to wider audiences.**