

Research Article

When the Past is Dead, what is History Doing Alive?

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Abstract: This study investigates the absoluteness ascribed to the past, its interconnectedness and linkage with history, the archaeology of both, the contextualization and systemization of their phenomenal relevance to the present and the future. The past has always been presented as a unit period full of events that history can recreate and re-enact for social engineering. Acting as a reservoir of historical determinations for history, the past, rich and resourceful when it comes to abundance of events, was subjected to critical enquiry to determine the scope and the extent of its recovery deficit or capacity. The study adopted a philosophical design using an epistemological approach and interrogation. Thus, a dialectical rigor that can explain the empirical reality of the past and that can as well resolve its ambiguities was required for accurate interpretation. Many critical events of the past were also subjected to analytical evaluation not just for elucidation but to pooh pooh the impression that the past is immortal. Extant literature on theoretical constructs that amplify the significance of the past to history will provide the platform for necessary theoretical analysis. The past as a process of social and material condition should be understood and situated within a context that distinguishes it from eternity. Unlike eternity that is projected as a continuous chain of human existence, the past, in whatever context it is used, is a detachable part of human existence that still interacts with the present and the future. It is the *déjà vu* of existence full of lessons for humanity especially from the actions and activities of victims, villains, heroes and actors that lived in the past. Therefore, viewing the past as one indivisible process, connecting the present with the future and or eternity showed that historians and of course, historiographers are under the theoretical assumption that the past is an unbroken process of human and sociological romanticism. The past is not an endless thread without a starting point or an end. The past is not immune from mortality and therefore it is not infinite. The past has a natural vanishing capacity. The past is mortal and so is history.

Keywords: Conceptualizing history, dialectical rigor, history, international relations, natural relationships, past

INTRODUCTION

Elementary knowledge of history explains the natural relationship between the past and history: the former supplies and produces the events and actors that form the platform for the empirical study of the latter. Both have an indispensable overlapping attachment. Nobody can clearly decipher the origin of this Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) but suffice it to say that this symbiosis seems convenient for events chroniclers whose craftsmanship and expertise require substantial material evidence to understand the dynamics of social engineering. Understandably, this cooperation is formed around three basic premises and presumptions:

- Without the past, history is redundant
- Without history, the past is non-existent
- without both past and history, man and his environment are stunted

How the chemistry between the past and history was struck to the point where the two now appreciate the value and potential they both possess in shaping and molding man and his environment can only be explained by probing humanity and a complex universality.

This study aims to correct the widely held impression that the past is an endless thread without a starting point or an end. The past, it is to be noted, is not immune from mortality and therefore it is not infinite. The past has a natural vanishing capacity. The past is mortal and so is history. The security of history as a discipline for social or society's engineering is endangered if the past which acts as the artery that pumps blood into every part of its component is heading towards extinction. Both the past and history have been living under the delusion that they are both immortal but that is not the reality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing history: First, let us deal with history and the way it is conceptualized by historians like Hegel and Marx. Hegel, for instance, conceived history as the “life of the world spirit”. Explaining what this means, Hegel believes that the world spirit is a person, but it is not a human being. He asserts:

Here, then, is a man, moving about The World. As he acts, observes and suffers, the world reveals itself to Him and he reveals himself to it, imposing his demands on it and pursuing his purposes through it. He spiritualizes nature and it impresses a nature on his spirit. He discovers what stones and flowers and water are like and how to look up at the stars and down canyons. He learns to change the shapes of nature, to mix and separate its elements. He learns how to live, how to make live, how to let live and how to kill. He gains understanding of the world's glories, charms, deformities and dangers. He intervenes in it to secure survival, power and pleasure (Cohen, 2000).

Essentially, Hegel's conception of history as the life of the world spirit and his description of man's interaction with nature offers an insight into how man adapts himself to his society, how he socializes with nature, how he imposes himself on his environment and gradually establishes a survival strategy that takes him through a process of stability and physical destruction (kill). In achieving a spiritual transcendence and emotional stability and physicality, man imposes his authority on his environment by socializing with the elements that constitute its economic and political structures. This way, man forces nature to cooperate with him, his needs and his demands. Invariably, these interactions become the symbols of activity between history and the sociological reality of human existence. With this cooperation, it becomes pertinent to observe that history is vital to human and environmental development. In the words of Robert Mackenzie:

Human history is a record of progress—a record of accumulating knowledge and increasing wisdom, of continual advancement from a lower to a greater platform of intelligence and well-being. Each generation passes on the next the treasures which it inherited, beneficially modified by his own experience, enlarged by the fruits of all the victories which itself has gained... The growth of man's well-being rescued from the mischievous tampering of self-willed princes, is left now to the beneficial regulation of great providential laws (Fukuyama, 2006).

It follows, therefore, from the above statement, that if history is a record of progress, the past would have to be active by acting as a reservoir of these records of

progress. The past becomes the interchange between the present and the future. It is this harmony that history coordinates to generate archival documentation for historians. The significance of the relationship between history and the past is to ensure that the expected progress is achieved through a meticulous planning, organization and coordination of what the present and the future are inheriting from the past in terms of legacy. Development, as an index of progress, is measured by how the present has converted the goodwill and inheritance of the past for productive and meaningful (infra) structure. What is incontestable is the fact that the harmony, cooperation, understanding and agreement between the past and history stimulate the process of development and progress in the society. Socialization as a mechanic for advancement is facilitated by the organic symbiosis between the past and history. The influence of both of these on mankind and nature is what translates to progress and of course, it is this that transforms the society. Though one is independent of the other, the past, history and society cannot afford to work independently if they have to play the role imposed on them by nature and “doctrine of necessity”.

Perhaps, this is where Karl Marx idea of what history is seeming apt. According to him:

History is the history of human industry, which undergoes growth in productive, power, the stimulus and vehicle of which is an economic structure, which perishes when it has stimulated more growth than it can contain (Cohen, 2000).

Central formulations in Hegel's philosophy of history re-appear transmuted in Marx. For example:

...the world spirit has had the patience to pass through these (cultural) forms in the long expanse of time, taking upon itself the tremendous labor of world history in which it imparted as much of its content to every form as that form was capable of holding (Thompson, 1978a).

Without delving much into the dynamics of Marx' historical materialism, his view that “it was not spiritual attitudes, but external conditions, the wealth men enjoyed or lacked...which shaped society”, reinforces the position that all structures of development are domiciled in the historical process that defines the interaction and relationship between the past and history and of course, the effect and influence of this on man and his environment. This tripartite working relationship could have evolved naturally but some theoretical deformities would have to be resolved in view of recent developments that are casting doubts on the sustainability of the relationship as a result of its conceptual disability.

Though the society is a major beneficiary of this cooperation, in terms of advancement which could have

come through a thorough digestion of records of progress, the fact that its continued existence and permanent death, or disappearance, can only be determined by a Universal force or the Christian GOD, takes it beyond any theoretical illuminations. It is given that human existence, mankind or humanity will remain a constant phenomenon in all equations irrespective of its eternal indetermination. In a similar vein, the environment with all its structures and all its features is built to function till it self-destructs. This is why its constancy is guaranteed to the extent that it sustains all the symbols that activate and promote its renewal mechanisms. One can argue therefore that no theory can proscribe man out of his fixed physicality, for as long as the environment acts as an *alibi* for man's continued existence.

Having contentiously excluded the environment from any conceptual liability, we are left with the option of analyzing the relationship between the past and history from a theoretical perspective and the possibility of a permanent dissolution of this marriage of "inconvenience" if truly this is what it is.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Between narrative history and theoretical history: I begin this way. What is history without a theory? Among historians themselves, there seems to be no agreement on how best to handle their discipline. Some historians feel comfortable with the idea of a 'narrative history' while others believe in 'theoretical history'. Narrative history can be described as the kind of story that you tell people without recourse to any logical sequencing and rigorous interrogation. 'Narrative history' is not judgmental nor is it subject to epistemological realism. It is a give-it-as-it-is kind of narration which is protective of the quality of facts at its disposal and is more concerned about how to present the facts in their original state rather than corrupt them with value judgements and prejudices. Narrative history does not connote a discipline that is bereft of academic rigor and practical intellection. It only underscores the significance of the traditional process of preserving the facts of history and enforcing compliance with the conservative methodology of presenting the facts of history without any intellectual ornamentation. Before the intrusion of social sciences and western imperial scholarship, narrative history was not treated with contempt because the world saw nothing wrong in the way and manner it was being handled. However, running away from making judgements on the past is a dangerous problematic for history. What is the basis of utilizing the evidence of the past to interrogate the present and the future if it shies away from passing judgements on the wrongs and rights of those whose actions ruined or glorify the past? This is why some writers believe that narrative history has become a victim of scornful pedagogy and is gradually vanishing

into irrelevance conceding space and superiority to what can be described as "theoretical history".

What then is "theoretical" history? 'Theoretical' history is the scientific side of history. It is the product of scientific analysis. It is scientific in the sense that it advocates for a more rigorous approach and methodology to the understanding and teaching of history. Theoretical history requires a thorough and comprehensive scrutiny of the facts of history through an analytical process that emphasizes logic, reasoning, sequencing, comprehensibility, coherence, accuracy and verifiability. These demands are made to ensure that what is being collected or inherited from the past is not a collection of garbage that will make history a laughing stock to other disciplines. The theoretical historians believe that through this process, all prejudices, biases, animosities and historical discrepancies would have been distilled and consequently ensure that what is being stored or preserved for posterity is not what can destroy or stunt the progress and development of the society.

Preferring to call it 'Historical Theory', E.P. Thompson in his book, *The Poverty of Theory* and other essays, laments that it was very odd that historians had been operating through several decades without any theory. He complains:

So, this is odd. Historians have no theory. Marxist historians have no theory either. Historical theory, then, must be something different from Marxist historical theory (Carr et al., 1961).

In trying to resolve some of the seeming contradictions in the need to theorize history, Thompson cautions:

We must once again purify our concept of the theory of history and purify it radically, of any contamination by the obviousness of empirical history, since we know that this 'empirical history' is merely the barefaced of the empiricist ideology of history...We must grasp in all its rigor the absolute necessity of liberating the theory of history from any compromise with 'empirical' temporality (Carr et al., 1961).

E.H. Carr, in his famous book, "What Is History?" suggests that historians should improve the standard of history to make it more scientific and make their demands on those who pursue it more rigorous (Green and Troup, 1999). This appeal, with its attendant advantages, has failed to win converts among some conservative historians who still show strong resistance to theory. Though few historians still believe that theory is a means to crack a particular problem, majority of them want to stick to their 'historic' approach. In another admonition from Lynn Abrams on the need for an oral tradition theory, he posits:

Conducting an interview is a practical means of obtaining information about the past. But in the process of eliciting and analyzing the material, one is confronted by the oral history interview as an event of communication which demands that we find ways of comprehending not just what is said, but also how it is said, why it said and what it means. Oral history practice then demands that one thinks about theory. Indeed, it is the practice, the doing of oral history that leads to theoretical innovation (Burrus et al., 2005).

But a very crucial issue raised in this whole discourse is the role of the past or how history should retrieve facts, evidence, proofs and truths from the past. According to Anna Green and Kathleen Troupe, “the past exists independently of the individual’s mind and is both observable and verifiable” (Green and Troup, 1999).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A vanished past or a dead past?: This question about the past and its status in determining and recovering the facts in its possession casts aspersion on the identity and the relevance of the past in producing concrete material for interpretation and interrogation. In order to make progress and develop its structures, the society, via the historians, should gather, criticize and verify all the available sources before it can be in a better position to reconstruct the past accurately. But the question is which past are we talking about, the past that is alive or the past that is dead? Making a mockery of the past, Marc Bloch mused:

What historian has not had the daydream of being able, like Ulysses, to body forth the shades for questioning, though those ethereal shades leave, at best only ‘tracks’ (Fukuyama, 2006).

However, Bloch was supported by other writers who submitted that “it is the very disappearance of the past that authorizes the quite different fact of its being written”. In fact, Michel de Certeau puts it bluntly:

Historians, like psychoanalysts, can attend to a return of the past only through the discourse of the present” (Fukuyama, 2006).

Gareth Stedman Jones puts it this way, history “is an entirely intellectual operation which takes place in the present and in the head” the “pastness of the past”, (Thompson, 1978b) as Clark puts it, informs Michael Oakeshott’s notions of historical practice. Oakeshott argued that “the historian can only infer, not retrieve, a vanished past” (Jenkins, 1995). Oakeshott submits:

Reentering a past that has disappeared is an impossible feat. The historical fact must be recognized not as what really happened but as

what the evidence obliges us to believe” (Green and Troup, 1999).

Clark contends that Oakeshott’s position suggests that history is not out there “but is something that historians create”. Furthermore, the argument is that it is difficult to retrieve events of the past in their original form because “historians neither rethink the thoughts of the dead nor relive their lives, but rather bring questions of the present to bear upon the remains, they necessarily understand the past in ways that people of the time did not” (Abrams, 2016).

The argument about the absoluteness and the reality of the past is not just central to the issue of historical relevance or the relevance of history. It is important to the resolution of whether history can stand on its own, can create itself, can invent and re-invent itself without the framework that the past will provide. Having established the symbiotic affinity between the two, it is only logical that once there is a question about the existential nature of one, the other will naturally suffer from such fate. We may argue that the past and history are like Siamese twins and that the death of one of the twins during separation or in any other circumstances, may not necessarily lead to the death of the other. It must however, be noted that as conjoined twins, nobody is talking about history being separated from the past or the past being separated from history. We are simply saying that once there are fundamental questions raised about the conceptual identity and status of one of them, the other suffers irretrievably and psychologically. If the past supplies the events and the actors that history uses for interpreting the present, it is expected that the past itself must be real, active and alive.

When Clark says “pastness of the past” and Oakeshott laments the ‘vanished past’, they are both suggesting that the past is imperfect in reproducing the contents in its storage. In other words, the past is in deficit of its own events and records because it cannot recover everything that history needs from it to be able to give accurate interpretation to the present. To parody Green and Troup again, “the historian can represent the past objectively and accurately through adherence to impartial research, devoid of a priori beliefs and prejudices. In other words, the truth of an historical account rests upon its correspondence to the facts”.¹⁶ But here, we are talking of a past that has no facts to supply because it is in deficit of such facts.

Another problematic associated with the past is about the ‘immortal’ character that historians have ascribed to it. By doing this, historians are creating the impression that the past is eternal. The past is not eternal nor is it immortal. The past is about people that are dead; things that have died; events that have passed; heroes that are sleeping in their graves and villains that are confined to their underground apartments. The past indeed is dead. Its death has ushered in other virile

successors such as: “In the ancient times”, “In the olden days”, “In the beginning”, “Yesteryears”, “A long time ago”, “In recent past”, “Long ago”, etc. If the past is still alive why do, we have to create successors? All these eulogistic phrases collectively connote one thing: the past. If historians, or whoever must have coined these phrases for their convenience, it is simply because they know that the past they want to capture is elusive or it has vanished.

CONCLUSION

The future of history: Then, of what value is a dead past to history? If, as argued earlier, history is progress and development-oriented, how does the past that is dead contribute to this progress? The expectation is that with accurate reading and interpretation of the events that happened in the past, the society will benefit from the lessons that the past can bequeath to the present and the future. Unfortunately, some of the contradictions attached to this expectation have not been addressed. For instance, why should there still be tyrants when many of them are lying down there in the graves? If the past of the heroes in the graves was of any value to the living, why do people still choose to be villains? If those who caused wars in the past are lying lifeless in the graves with the grave consequences of their actions, why should some people opt for war instead of embracing peace? Why do we have on the surface numerous duplicates of those lying below the surface? What has been history’s response to the Biblical phrase: “As it was in the beginning, Is Now and ever shall it be”? Overall, what does the society benefit from the recording and reading of the follies and vanities of past humanity when the world is still full of actors who are consciously rejecting the guide of history by indulging in similar follies and vanities? Without history, those who have the drive and aspiration for heroic feats can achieve their goal without visiting the cemetery and the archives to appreciate the value of heroism. Of what significance then is a discipline like history whose impact has no enduring and eternal value on monuments and actors in history?

In his controversial book titled: *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama explained that his article on this subject excited an extraordinary amount of commentary and controversy. He complained:

Many people were confused in the first instance by my use of the word “history” ... And yet, what I suggested had come to an end was not the occurrence of events, even large and grave events; but history, that is history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process, when taking into account the experience of all peoples in all times” (Carrard, 2006).

This defense appears to me somehow escapist. Whatever Fukuyama calls his own history, “a single,

coherent, evolutionary process...”, cannot be insulated from the general history he describes as “occurrence of events, even large and grave events”. Any evolutionary process, single or coherent, is a unit of what is called history, general or particular. What Fukuyama did not want to admit was that the whole ideological process while it was unfolding and while it lasted as a cold war between liberal democracy and communism was futile and unproductive to the systemic characterization of a world that is dynamic and a discipline that is ambiguous. If what is history was that precise and coherent, he conflicts or misunderstands Fukuyama and his intellectual persecutors could have been avoided.

Besides, history itself is a product of an evolutionary process. Its movement from what we have called ‘Narrative history’ to ‘Theoretical History’ was a major radical development considering the obstinacy and resistance of ‘conservative historians’ who never wanted the shift, no matter how significant. By this, Fukuyama’s argument stands logic on his head. Why did he, or why does he prefer to call his academic adventure evolutionary process instead of historical process if according to him, what he suggested had come to an end “was not the occurrence of events, even large and grave events, but history, that is, history understood as a single evolutionary process...” The triumph of liberal democracy could not have been “history as a single evolutionary process” because here was a process that almost resulted into a world war. Fukuyama claimed that many people were confused by the use of the word ‘history’ and the question to ask is: why would they not be confused when a conflation of the whole controversy shows that the writer himself was not sincere when he denied that that was not what he meant. Even if we concede that that was not his intention, it is difficult to agree with him that his intentions were noble and that there was no mischief. If the experiment had worked, if there had been no opposition to the word ‘history’, would Fukuyama today not be celebrating the “End of History...”?

End of history: Let the truth be told, it is the end of history. The past which acts as the artery that pumps blood into every part of its component is already dead. Why must we continue to glorify a past that is dead by deluding ourselves that it still has something to offer us that can help shape our present and fortify our future? If the reason we study the past is to understand the present and its value contents, its moral ethos and its spirituality, I humbly submit that this is very unnecessary. What values, what morals and what spirituality does the past have to offer that we don’t already have in our contemporary world? The dynamics of contemporary issues are too overwhelming and volatile to co-exist with the relics of an expired past. Why must we exert much energies studying the past when the lessons we seek are right here in our midst. In some of the so-called superpowers we have very good

examples of rising and declining empires; in some of our so-called world leaders, we have very good examples of tyrants, despots and benevolent leaders. In our private homes, we have very good examples of terrible parents and responsible parents. There is a bit of pride in the claim of historians that it was the lessons that man learnt from history that had contributed to the reduction in the number of fallen empires, the number of present-day tyrants and despots and the renewal of hope for the survival of man and all institutional monuments. Though this is very contentious and debatable, can this be a sufficient reason for history to keep living when its partner is resting in 'piece'?

Some Universities still keep their Departments of History intact while some have incorporated and aligned their curriculum to accommodate courses like Political Science, International Studies, Strategic Studies, International Relations and Governmental Studies. I suggest to the "Obstinate" universities to review their curriculum to see if they can accommodate some of the courses listed above as a way of refreshing their departments and blending with the time.

If we must sympathize with the past and by extension historians, we can oblige them some referral privilege by citing them as footnotes for contemporary discourse.

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