

The author's main conclusion is that we are unable to avoid the mistakes of the past because our understanding of history itself is problematic.¹ He uses three key premises to jointly support his intermediate conclusion that our understanding of history itself is problematic: (1) that historians have to speculate and select historical sources, leading to bias, (2) that conventional categories preclude us from knowing the reality of the past, and (3) that history is always written by the victors, rendering all of history a collection of "fables". While the last premise takes too extreme of a position in dismissing the possibility of truth in history altogether, the criticisms of historical knowledge construction he raises sufficiently prove his intermediate conclusion that our understanding of history is problematic. However, he does not sufficiently demonstrate that these problems completely prevent us from learning from the past to avoid its mistakes, making his eventual conclusion an under-substantiated one.²

The first problem the author raises pertains to speculation and selection — he presents a dichotomy, arguing that the historian must speculate when sources are lacking and select subjectively which sources to include when they are abundant. These are both astute criticisms: historical records are often scarce when we are studying ancient civilisations, since artefacts and oral accounts often fail to stand the test of time. Hence, historians are forced to fill in the gaps of evidence using their own imagination or speculation—our understanding of the Indus Valley civilisation, for instance, is largely built on such historical guesswork given the paucity of historical records. Hence, uncertainty and subjectivity inevitably percolate into historical knowledge construction. When records are abundant, historians also have to select which sources to use based on their own subjective biases. Given the thousands of accounts of the Cuban Missile Crisis that pin the blame variously on Khrushchev, Kennedy and Castro, a historian inevitably needs to pick accounts to tell a coherent account of the crisis. Biases enter historical knowledge as a result: a Western-educated historian might

¹ Charitably, not quite a part of the main conclusion.

² Ok, but reading the main conclusion as such is not as charitable as if you had read the sub-conclusion as the main conclusion.

subconsciously select more Western sources that blame Khrushchev since this aligns with his understanding of the crisis as he was taught in school. Therefore, bias inevitably infiltrates historical knowledge regardless of whether records are abundant or scarce; the author's accounting for both possibilities makes his criticism particularly well-founded.³

The author's second criticism of historical knowledge construction is that historians use conventional categories that veil historical reality, offering the central example of imposing colonial frames onto diverse, precolonial Africa which ignores the heterogeneity of the continent and African writers before our time. This is a valid criticism: many historians, in constructing histories of Africa, did neglect and erase many indigenous accounts and traditions.⁴ For instance, when Britain colonized Nigeria and subjugated the Igbo people to colonial rule, they often slaughtered village elders who carried with them longstanding Igbo traditions and stories of the past, leading to such indigenous histories being lost. Additionally, when examining Africa through the lens of colonialism, many historians focus on the impact that colonial rule has had on modern-day African states, neglecting the pre-1800 traditions and oral histories of African cultures. This is because they have little relevance to the goal of these historians' inquiries: to discuss colonialism's impact on the modern day. Hence, the author correctly observes that "conventional categories" impede our ability to understand the past fully. In fact, the author's argument here is strengthened by his pre-empting of the possible objection that postcolonial historicism can recover the lost voices of indigenous communities—he observes that postcolonial historicism still reinforces colonial power structures. This is true, as even postcolonial historians ignore African histories that have little to do with colonialism: inter-tribe strife before the entry of colonisers is often omitted from such accounts, as it contradicts the overarching narrative that these historians would like to paint of a destructive colonial power subjugating these peoples.⁵ Hence, conventional categories do limit our ability to uncover all of history in an objective manner.⁶

³ Ok. Relevant and well-supported.

⁴ Because African history is predominantly undocumented and knowledge is transmitted orally...

⁵ Good.

⁶ Ok. No challenge though? Can categories be avoided?

The author's third criticism is perhaps the weakest because of how extreme a manner it is couched: he contends that histories are *never* the truth because history is *always* written by the winners. While histories may *often* be written by the victors, as his example of the Egyptians and Hittites both claiming victory illustrates, he cannot claim that *all* history is written by the victors.⁷ Often, we hear the loser's side of the war as well: numerous Allied atrocities during WWII have come to light because revisionists have sought to undermine the traditional narrative that they were completely virtuous liberators. That said, the author's general point—that victors often shape the histories that are told—is an accurate one.⁸ Thus, this forms a valid critique of the possibility of objectively understanding history (the author's main intermediate conclusion), even if this fails to substantiate his extreme claim that all history is false.

At this point, the author has sufficiently⁹ demonstrated that there are problems with our understanding of history. However, the author takes an additional step to argue that these problems prevent us from avoiding the mistakes of the past—it is this inferential leap that is the weakest part of his argument. Unfortunately, the author erroneously assumes that bias in history is so severe that it prevents us from learning from history altogether, a presumption that does not stand up to scrutiny for two reasons.¹⁰

First, many biases that he describes can be mitigated (even if not completely overcome) through historical discourse, as we critically examine the subjective lenses that colour historians' accounts. For instance, present-day Chinese historians have recognized that Sima Qian's works such as *Shiji* were often written under the dictats of the Han court, and as a result, his works are now studied for their literary rather than historical value. Further, the fact that postcolonial historians are able to identify the racist elements of their predecessors' accounts of Africa, and the fact that the author himself is able to identify and criticize the biases of these postcolonial historians, suggests that historical discourse can play a key role in weeding out biases over time.¹¹ Hence, the problem of subjectivity can be minimized even if it cannot be

⁷ Ok, but this is borderline nitpicky. Focus on the implications.

⁸ What does this entail in terms of knowledge construction?

⁹ Just because there is bias and problems with historical methodology means that our understanding of History in general is flawed? Really? Please challenge!

¹⁰ Ok.

eliminated. The author fails to show why these biases are so severe that history will completely fail at its desideratum of allowing us to learn from the past.¹²

Second, and more importantly, subjectivity is not necessarily an obstacle to learning from the past; in fact, it often enables us to learn from the mistakes of our predecessors. This is because what we need to learn from the past is not a completely objective, exhaustive account of everything that happened in history; that would merely be a meaningless list of facts that do not fit into a coherent narrative for us to learn from.¹³ Rather, we need some subjectivity on the part of the historian to piece together facts into a cogent narrative with instructive value. A historian that attributes Hitler's rise to the appeal of fascist ideology might subjectively ignore the role that the economic privilege of the Jews played, but his account tells us an important story with a key message we can learn from: that we need to purge noxious ideologies like fascism from civil discourse to avoid another Holocaust. Hence, it is subjectivity that enables us to learn from history in the first place, making the author's final claim that biases in history condemn us to repeat its mistakes fundamentally misguided.¹⁴

Overall, with appropriate weakening of the author's third criticism of victors writing history, the author is justified in claiming that historical knowledge encounters problems of bias and subjectivity. However, his final conclusion—that this leads us to repeat the mistakes of history—is built on two shaky assumptions and cannot be granted.

Score

AO1: 8/10

AO2: 11/15

AO3: 5/5

Total: 24/30

Comments

¹¹ Ok, but how exactly does this mechanism work? Who ensures that historians know what to study as literary or historical sources? Explain.

¹² Point is relevant but insufficiently explored or dealt with.

¹³ Ok.

¹⁴ Ok.

Very good piece. Clear and systematic treatment of the main premises and key ideas relating to History. Relevant points raised, mostly with sufficient justification and explanation. Your strengths are in your ability to concisely reconstruct and clearly express your ideas. Good job there.

Evaluation: much more can be said about many of the author's claims. Charitably, the sub-conclusion makes a more appropriate main conclusion. Evaluation can go further in considering AO1 issues. While you do consider what some of his main premises entail, argument-wise (e.g. if History is written by the victors, then how does that impact his main conclusion about learning from the past), go further to examine the nature of History and why there still seems to be a commitment to truth (why do historians still insist that they aren't doing Literature?)

Good job anyway :)