

## History from a Philosophic Perspective

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### Abstract

One of the key components of Social Studies has always been history, yet many of us seldom explore what we mean by history. This paper delves into the meaning of history through an examination of Collingwood's work and a discussion of how we can incorporate twentieth century thought into his work. This paper aims, in Collingwood's words, to "deepen understanding" of our craft.

### Philosophy of History: Collingwood

The philosophies of history of Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Polybius, St Augustine, Bodin, Vico, Herder, and Hegel (selections in Tillinghast, 1963) and Collingwood (1956) make clear that understanding "history" is not easy. The questions that have to be answered, such as for and of whom is it written and why, are philosophical ones. Most of these philosophers saw history from a religious viewpoint: they viewed its events as illustrating the unfolding of "Providence," or God's purpose. However, Collingwood's work (1956) illustrates the true meaning of history.

Collingwood argues that certain early accounts, such as in pre-Greek societies, or certain modern accounts, like those based on dividing societies into a number of epochs, such as Marx's, are not really history, as they shape facts to suit their larger theoretical frameworks. Rather, history is the re-enactment of past thought in the mind of a historian in order to answer a question about people in the past the historian has first articulated. It is the past living as thought in the conscious mind of a historian at the present time. Thought is self-conscious: it can be enacted in minds of different times and places, as opposed to that of a "flow of consciousness" which is based on particular and contextualized emotions.

Collingwood, additionally, explains that history is not positivism, or describing unfolding, "progressive" narratives. For example, in his chapter on "Progress as created by Historical Thinking," (Collingwood, 1956) he describes a change occurring in a society of fishermen. He states this change can be seen as progressive or not depending on whether it led or did not lead to "something better" (Collingwood, 1956, p. 326). Knowledge gained by the historian allows him or her to comment on whether the changes occurring in a society are indeed

“progress,” or improvement. Assuming a progressively developing society, as many nineteenth century historians believed their own societies to be, is flawed thinking. For a change may be primarily positive or negative for a group of people. We can determine whether a change is positive or not by re-enacting in our own minds the society before and after the change and then seeing whether the new one indeed led to new solutions that solved both the problems the old thought was able to solve as well the problems it could not solve (Collingwood, 1956, p. 326).

Collingwood’s greatest insight may be that the re-enactment of thought allows us to understand ourselves better, to consider what it means to be human:

...History is ‘for’ human self-knowledge. It is generally thought to be of importance to man that he should know himself: where knowing himself means knowing not his merely personal peculiarities, the things that distinguish him from other men, but his nature as man. Knowing yourself means knowing, first, what it is to be a man; secondly, knowing what it is to be the kind of man you are and nobody else is. Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is. (Collingwood, 1956, p. 10)

Collingwood describes history as an art and a science. It is an art, as it requires creativity and imagination. From ancient times, history was seen as a ‘narrative,’ or story, but one that aimed to provide a truthful account of the world, as opposed to the narrative of poetry. (At that time, some writers did think it possible to comment “truthfully” — factually — on a situation.) The historian, as well, requires imagination, as he or she must be able to recreate within her or his own mind the thoughts of historical figures, extrapolate missing information, and judge the truthfulness of evidence, from his or her own perspective (Collingwood, 1956, p. 240). This “historical imagination” is “...self-explanatory, self-justifying, the product of an autonomous or self-authorizing activity” (Collingwood, 1956, p. 246).

History is also a science, as knowledge is constructed inductively and based on evidence, which is used to reconstruct the thought and determine its meaning. “History” is, in fact, derived from a Greek word meaning “research” or “inquiry.” This is differentiated from “positivistic history,” harshly criticised by Collingwood (Collingwood, 1956, p. 128). This latter form is history written as if historical facts are identical to the “causal laws” of nature. Thus, the historian shapes the facts he or she accumulates into causes and effects and views history as a progressive unfolding of events to the present. For example, Hegel (in Tillinghast, 1963) argues that history was the logical process of the self-development of reason — or “Spirit” — dialectically developed. Yet, historical events do not sequentially cause other things to happen, like the toppling of dominoes. Rather, changes grow out of previous changes; they integrate previous thought and events. History is a holistic process of integration and growth, not an evolution of dissected causes and events. The latter is a fiction of a historian who does not consider the complete context and comprehensive nature of all events. Kaestle explains this as the confusion of “correlations and associations with causes” (quoted in McCulloch and Richardson, 2000, p. 123). History doesn’t teach lessons; it deepens understanding by deepening our knowledge of what has been.

History is not a “scissors and paste” activity, which was a common approach until the

seventeenth century. The former involved collecting the comments of historical “authorities” into narratives, without analysis as to their veracity on the part of the historian. The correct methodology of the genuine historian was developed after the seventeenth century, according to Collingwood, with the Scientific Revolution. Firstly, like a good scientist, the historian must define a question or historical problem, to be solved through the study of historical evidence. This question leads to inquiry that results in a narrative which, “...must be localized in space and time...consistent with itself” (Collingwood, 1956, p. 246) and related to its evidence. Further, unlike the scissors and paste pseudo-historian, the bona fide historian must critically evaluate all "evidence," which can include written accounts as well as material evidence so as to determine validity and reliability.

Collingwood makes reference to a number of important philosophers of history, in particular, Croce. The latter argued that history “narrated” truth and was the only real knowledge: all events I can perceive up to the very moment I am now in are historical. The sentence I have just completed is at this moment itself now past knowledge. In other words, the only true knowledge “has been” (Collingwood, 1956, p. 197) and "reality consists of concepts or universals embodied in particular facts" (Collingwood, 1956, p. 197). He went on to argue that, accordingly, the role of philosophy was to serve as the methodology of history:

It was in Croce’s work of 1912 and 1913 that these ideas were fully worked out. In that work we find not only a complete expression of the autonomy of history, but also a double demonstration of its necessity: its necessity relatively to philosophy as the concrete thought of which philosophy is only the methodological moment, and its necessity relatively to science, as the source of all 'scientific facts' — a phase which only means those historical facts which the scientist arranges into classes (Collingwood, 1956, p. 202).

Croce saw history as, “self-knowledge of the living mind” (in Collingwood, 1956, p. 202). To Collingwood, it was a synthesis of evidence balanced by criticism, a “process of coming to understand” ourselves (Collingwood, 1956, p. 219).

### **History and Philosophy: Twentieth Century**

Throughout the twentieth century, philosophical trends have problematized “knowledge.” Unlike Collingwood, who believed that it was possible to have a "truthful" narrative of the past, postmodern, twentieth century thinkers, well illustrated in the work of Lacan (Usher and Edwards, 1994) and Foucault (1965, 1980, 1981, 1995), have argued that knowledge is itself a construct. Even the concept of “time” itself is described as constructed or relative. Further, a focus on science and the rise of social sciences' understanding of the link between the researcher and his or her context has brought many criticisms to bear on history as “imaginary elaboration” (Barthes, 1981). These thinkers, however, have not destroyed history; they have helped to make it conscious of itself. They have exploded the idea of a single, universal narrative and opened the way for many narratives and many forms of knowledge, thus, in fact, expanding the possibilities, types, and conceptualizations of history. Freed from constraints, many new types of history, such as women’s and post-colonial histories, have flourished, enriching our understanding in new ways.

Additionally, McCulloch and Richardson (2000) describe a split between the disciplines of History and of Education throughout the early twentieth century, as historians criticized the

present-minded focus of historians of education. However, as historians have become increasingly self-aware through historiography, as historical study has expanded in new directions, particularly into social history, and as forms of historical analysis, such as oral history, have developed, a bridge between the two subjects has formed. McCulloch and Richardson explain: "...we have suggested that these separate traditions are now in the process of breaking down and converging, and that this offers considerable potential for helping historians of education with their most complex task — that of understanding the reciprocal relation of education and society in different places and in different eras" (McCulloch and Richardson, 2000, p. 50). The answer lies in critical self-awareness and an analysis of one's study. Historians of education should, in words quoted from well-known historian Kaestle, "discard old assumptions, try new techniques, and attempt to meet more rigorous standards of evidence and argument" (quoted in McCulloch and Richardson, 2000, p. 49).

Social sciences such as sociology, anthropology and geography, McCulloch and Richardson add, provide tools, perspectives and areas of research for the historian. However, they need to be analyzed critically, for a researcher runs the risk of "finding" in historical study what supports his or her informing theory. These social sciences provide theories and tools that enhance study, but they need to be considered critically: "These influences [social scientific] greatly enrich the study of educational history. Yet, at the same time, they raise difficult problems of historical interpretation and contextualization, the tackling of which involves critical and sceptical engagement with theory rather than its straightforward and unquestioning application" (McCulloch and Richardson, 2000, p. 78). Debates over the meaning of history range beyond those of its relations with the social sciences, as illustrated in a discussion of debates in Canada.

### **Current Debate among Canadian Historians**

Much deliberation and interest in history has erupted in Canada recently due to concerns about citizenship and national identity (Osborne, 2003). One group argues that well told historical stories are particularly powerful in creating a common consciousness. For example, Granatstein (1998) states that history should be used to create a common "Canadian" identity through the teaching of one "nation-building" story based primarily in political history. Sometimes called "conservatives" in the United States, supporters of this view "use" (by choosing particular facts and omitting others and blending them into a heart-warming story) history to develop a common identity. They often eschew a focus on varied identities, multiculturalism, and history as investigation. For example:

...there is a certain content relating to the history of the Canadian nation of Canadian people or Canadian peoples that ought to be taught...If we are to have a country, Canada, if we are to teach something that's called Canadian history, our content has to be the public events of our common history, as well as some of the varieties of the private events. It is not being super-nationalistic or excessively patriotic to suggest that our sense of ourselves, especially our sense of where we have come from, is fundamental to our civic sense. (Bliss, 2002)

Others, such as Seixas (2002) and Osborne (1985), maintain that history should not be used in such an indoctrinating manner that teaches students constructed "myths" with the aim of creating a common identity. Rather, history should be used to teach students "historical

consciousness,” a critical awareness of history: “students need guided opportunities to confront conflicting accounts, various meanings, and multiple interpretations of the past, because these are exactly what they will encounter outside of school, and they need to learn to deal with them” (Seixas, 2002). This group supports the teaching of history as an academic discipline. Students should learn to question historical facts. They should be exposed to conflicting accounts of history and required to interpret these. In so doing, students will develop their investigative, interpretive, and analytic skills. Students should not be told a simple, patriotic story, for identity is not seen to reside in a common, nation-building narrative. Rather, the aim is to use history to create awareness of the danger of history used for particular purposes. These historians embrace a number of varied histories, particularly social history. In the words of Osborne (1985):

Indeed, the holders of power, past and present, have well understood the potential of history. They have used it and still use it to justify and glorify their position. History constantly runs the risk of being turned into propaganda... J. J. Plumb's (1973) distinction between *the past* and *history* is worth noting. He argues that the past is what man has used to justify and rationalize the present, whereas history tries to “see things as they really were” and thus “the critical historical process has helped to weaken the past, for by its very nature it dissolves those simple, structural generalizations by which our forefathers interpreted the purpose of life.” Thus history should be not propaganda, but counter-propaganda. (p. 54)

### **Combining the Threads: Philosophy of History for Today's World**

As Jordanova (2000) and Collingwood articulate, history is a holistic subject: it is both an art and a science, although these two elements are blended into a unique form of inquiry (Oakeshott, 1989). It is a science, as it is a process of conducting research using historical sources in order to enlighten a historian and his or her readers on a problem or issue visible in contemporary society. It is an art, for it requires interpretation. It involves “a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his [sic] facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (Carr, 1961, p. 30). In Collingwood’s words, it provides us with a deepened understanding, explained in the historian's story-like, yet fact-based, narrative. Many eminent scholars and writers have understood this, including Acton (1906) who wrote, “the study of history strengthens, and straightens, and extends the mind.” However, twentieth century thought understands knowledge itself to be a construct. Therefore, a narrative cannot now be called “truth”: it is always an *interpretation*, or an explanation (Jordanova, 2000), of selected past events, which nevertheless, can still inform. In the words of Carr (1961), “History means interpretation” (p. 23). This interpretation is based on the historian's own experience (Oakeshott, 1989).<sup>1</sup> It can be extended with the use of social science theories in interpreting data that provide new insights, approaches and lenses, although these should be used self-consciously.

Additionally, as Canadian historians such as Seixas (2002) and Osborne (1985) write, History should be “counter-propaganda.” While history can play a part in shaping a people's common consciousness by providing a context to people’s understanding of themselves and their

nation, it should not be used as propaganda: an account of the past that both builds a complex, multilayered identity and develops an informed and critical awareness is possible.<sup>2</sup> For example, rather than simply teaching students that building the CPR was a grand, heroic endeavour that developed the Canadian nation, students should explore its multiple stories: the exploitation of Chinese workers, the conflicts over its building, the political tensions and battles over its expense, the biographies of some of those involved in its construction. Similarly, rather than paint a rosy picture of Confederation as “birthing” Canada, students should learn of the political conflicts and turmoil involved, of the opposition to it by certain groups, of the lethargy to it by others, of its exclusionary nature, of the odd personality and heavy drinking of Macdonald.

I recall being taught the false, mythic version of Canadian history in school and then realising that it was false, when I read Francis (1997). His book explodes the “myths” — such as of the CPR, of the RCMP, of the Master Race, of unity, of Heroism, of Wilderness, and of the North — I had been taught. He provides historical facts that counter these common nation-building narratives as a way of demonstrating how history (through Social Studies) in high schools is taught in ways that aim to create a particular national identity, a specific “collective memory.” For example, he explains that the RCMP were often not the grand defenders of the Northwest they were alleged to be. Rather, they were involved in a number of brutal and repressive actions towards workers, such as at the Winnipeg General Strike. My first reaction was one of resentment: I had been duped, sold a story, not really taught to think, to question, to see in a new light.<sup>3</sup> What type of students will graduate from our high schools if we do not have our students reflect on what has been? Teaching nation-building narratives implies passivity on the part of students. Students should contemplate the events they study, rather than simply accept everything they are told. “Historical consciousness” implies specific objectives as does the teaching of a “common consciousness,” but the former aims at developing reflective thought, critical awareness and questioning and the latter aims at killing individual thought and questioning and developing mindless robots supportive of the *status quo*.

The aim of good history writing is deepened understanding, which can lead to new perspectives that result in change, when well and powerfully told, as so many philosophers — including Collingwood and Foucault, who called it generating new genealogies — have understood. In addition, historians in Canada are often divided into two camps: those who support a traditional, “political”-based narrative, such as Granatstein, and mostly younger or “new” historians, who focus on social history, non-political history, the boundaries of traditional histories, and those groups excluded or marginalized in earlier histories (Osborne, 2003; Axelrod, 1996). History includes both, for the two are necessary for fully exploring the past. All historians have one shared belief: they understand the power of historical accounts to influence both individuals and society and to “deepen understanding,” as Collingwood (1956) wrote, of ourselves.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>I see a “fact” as a nugget of information, verifiable from a number of sources. For example, the establishment of the “dominion of Canada” in 1867 is a fact. A “narrative” contains facts. However, as these facts are digested, ordered, and interpreted by the historian and then structured into a written framework, a narrative is an interpretation. The latter term signifies, to me, an understanding of a situation, event, or object arrived at by the historian. It is a

theoretical construct, a possible answer, a viewpoint on a historical occurrence.

<sup>2</sup>Learning History is always linked to identity formation, but it can still be taught critically and expansively. This process will create a better, more informed, and self-conscious identity.

<sup>3</sup>This type of History teaching is “propaganda,” as is the soviet. To quote Wertsch (2002): “As analysts such as Anthony Smith (1991) have noted, of crucial importance to efforts to build and maintain national identity are “compulsory, standardized, public mass education systems, through which state authorities hope to inculcate national devotion and a distinctive, homogenous culture” (p. 16). Many aspects of formal education undoubtedly contribute to this socialization effort” (p. 70). In a liberal, democratic state, the government should have more respect for the intelligence and freedom of its people. Further, historians, such as Granatstein (1998), who argue for the teaching of a unified, mythic account based a few, narrow historical personages and events are wrong: excluding large groups of individuals including women and other ethnicities from a historical account is not going to create unity. Rather, it will create feelings of alienation and exclusion, and many will simply tune out. As Osborne (2003) wrote, “students are not listening” (p. 597); or in the words of Wertsch, they may “master” the story if forced to, but they will not “appropriate” it. A broad, expansive history that includes debate and discussion about events and personages in the past and shapes a cultivated intelligence will be far more captivating and valuable.

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