IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature (IMPACT: IJRHAL)
ISSN (P): 2347-4564; ISSN (E): 2321-8878
Vol. 6, Issue 9, Sep 2018, 219-224

HISTORY, ARTS OR SCIENCE: AN ESSAY IN PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Ibiang Oden Ewa
Senior Lecturer, Department of History and Strategic Studies,
Alex Ekweume Federal University, Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi, Nigeria

Received: 25 Aug 2018 **Accepted:** 12 Sep 2018 **Published:** 22 Sep 2018

ABSTRACT

There is an unceasingdebate on whether history is science or arts, with scholars especially of the postmodern persuasion putting forward charges to assail the position of history as a science. This paper argues, that despite claims against the scientific nature of history, the methods, ultimate subject matter, and objectives of both history and science are fundamentally similar. Therefore history is a science, not arts.

KEYWORDS: *History, Arts, Science, Essay, Philosophy*

INTRODUCTION

From ancient times the pursuit of nearly all knowledge by scholars was done within the ambit of philosophy. Up to the 19th century philosophy was the sole discipline under which thoughts and inquiries in diverse fields of knowledge were carried out. It thus encompassed such areas of knowledge as religion, rhetoric, literature, classics, natural science, history, social science, and mathematics. During this period history evolved as a science but within philosophy.

In the early decades of the 19th-century, the direct study of historical events was begun by the German philosopher, George Hegel. This signaled the nigh of time for the separation of history from philosophy. In the mid-19th century, history was established as a separate academic and professional discipline in European universities, when Leopold Von Ranke, another German scholar, introduced into its study what is called the critical method, a feat which earned him recognition as the father of modern history.

In spite of the changes in its evolution, history retained the status of a science; with historicists like Hegel, and more especially Marx, searching for laws of historical explanation as was being done with the search for laws in the natural sciences. Towards the end of the 19th century, modern natural science began to emphasise observation, experimentation, laws, and absolute truth as its characterisation. As this trend coincided with the innate ambivalence of historicism and its incipient failure to establish universal laws of historical progress, the classification of history as a science began to come under excoriation. Since then, the issue of whether or not history is a science has become a recurring polemic in philosophy of history, historiography, and philosophy of science.

History as Science

Since Edward HalletCarr came up with his seminal book, *What is History?*, published nearly six decades ago, in which he made a refutation of some issues raised against the scientific nature of history, more comments and claims, which suggest that history is not a science, have continued to appear. My task in this paper is to locate some of such claims and comments, dispute them, and hopefully establish that history is a science, not arts.

Let us look first at the conception that science, in contrast with history, is founded upon natural, not man-made, entities. Therefore "science is based not upon artifacts but upon facts" (Shapon 71). In the light of this conception, there can be no distinction between history and science. History, like science, is also founded upon a great natural entity called man; it deals with how man interacted with his environment in time past. Therefore, man, a natural entity, is at the center of history. Like science, history is also based upon facts, not artifacts. The facts upon which history is based are obtained by the historian from historical evidence, which is contained in such sources of history as written documents, oral testimonies, traditions, and artifacts. Although artifacts are indications of human civilization, they are not necessarily or primarily facts of history; but they could, as any other historical evidence, contain the facts of history. Thus history is based, not on artifacts, but on facts. Indeed, a fundamental nexus between history and science is that both are founded on facts. This is an irrefutable truth, which has been continually upheld by scholars. Arthur Marwick, for instance, in his recent work, *The New Nature of History*, maintains that history, like science, evolves from evidence and remains "of central importance to society" (268).

In 1969 Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., a scientist, denied the scientific nature of history in a comment that cannot be ignored:

What we call history is in reality only an image or hypothetical conception of the actual past. Historical facts are really only propositions about the past based upon the remaining evidence and how these propositions fit into a general interpretative scheme already postulated. The historian, unlike the social scientist, can never check his conclusions against a personally inspected, complex living reality, only against the fragmentary remains of that once living reality (12).

By presenting history as a hypothetical conception of the actual past, Berkhofer has obfuscated the true nature and meaning of history and has wrongly conjured the entire historical enterprise as a facile accomplishment. History is neither an ideality nor a hypothetical framework of the past. No one can deny, for instance, the reality of the battle of Waterloo, where Napoleon was defeated by the British and Prussian forces in 1815 or the battle of Adowa in which Ethiopian soldiers defeated the Italian forces of General OresteBarattiere in 1896; nor is there any question, that an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on 6th August, 1945 or, that the Atlantic Slave Trade ever was.

It cannot, therefore, be said that these obvious facts of history, no matter how fragmentary the evidence leading to their knowledge is, are mere hypothetical propositions about the past. They remain as valid truths as any scientific conclusions. The factuality of these events cannot be confirmed merely from the quantum of their relics, but more importantly from any evidence, including relics, obtained through historical inquiry. Thus in history, what accounts for a valid conclusion is the quality, not necessarily the quantum, of evidence available.

Berkhofer's presumptuous allusion to history as a "once living reality" is borne out of a general misconception of history as a postmortem investigation. History deals with the past, whose realities are so enduring, that they remain with

the present in a mutual interface. The present sits on the past because the past is alive and real. In fact much of the history we call contemporary history deals with the living past, and its conclusions, as in the social sciences, can be checked against living reality.

At the International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences, held in January, 1992 in New York, Serguei P. Kapitza presented a paper in which he did not only suggest that history and science were different but also implied that history was irrelevant to the development of modern science. The arrogance with which he postured his opinion was as obvious as the ignorance he demonstrated concerning the relationship between history and science. He wrote:

Students of science know well that its presentation can be mastered without at all dealing with its past evolution. A modern expert and professional in science can be trained, and in general, is trained in total unawareness of the history of science…. Every expert of humanistic development and education is deeply rooted in the history of ideas and nations. Science, however, can be disconnected from its past (3).

The past of any process in which human actions and thoughts are involved cannot be isolated from its present. Any scientist who seeks to accomplish any scientific activity in total disregard of the scientific past is dangerously heading towards the precipice. At any given time, every scientist or student of science has with him the scientific past, formed over time through learning and experience. The scientific knowledge and experience acquired in the past and internalised over time constitute the scientist's own history of science. The scientist or student of science consciously or subconsciously uses his history of science in every scientific activity in which he is involved in the present. The history of science that the scientist has internalised informs him in his decision, actions, and choices as well as enhances his ability to investigate, understand, and master scientific presentations and issues. For instance, the scientist begins his work by formulating or identifying the problem. To accomplish this initial task, he must think back or find out if the problem he has identified has already been worked on by another scientist in the past and, if so, whether he can improve on it or look at it from a different dimension or discard it for want of relevance. This is an indispensable inquiry which, *ab initio*, takes the scientist into the scientific past. To insist, therefore, that science can be disconnected from its past is to denounce the reality and utilitarian nature of history ofscience, whose greater relevance in the development of modern science was correctly predicted in the 18th century by Joseph Priestly. Alluding to works on the history of science done during his time in the 18th century, Priestly wrote:"These histories are evidently much more necessary in an advanced state of science than in the infancy of it" (Schaffer 75.) Also, most recent opinion from Kapitza's fellow scientists rather stresses "prior knowledge" as a significant step in the scientific method (Miller and Harley 13).

Let us take another look at the old notion, that history teaches no lessons and cannot predict. Concerning the lessons of history, let me recall my encounter with my students some years ago. I taught a course titled "Introduction to History", offered by students from history, law, sociology, and education. It was usually a large class of over 250 students, holding on the 3rd floor of the library complex. On the particular occasion in question, I came into the classroom to deliver a lecture on the utility of history. I sharply opened the lecture by pointedly asserting, that history was most essential to life, and that without history, all of us in the class, including me, could be casualties within the next 24 hours. The students responded immediately, shouting "No!, "how can?", "not true!", "Prove it!" etc.As soon as calm returned, I began my explanation with two simple questions, which I asked the students. The first question: Would you cross the road ifyou were about 3 yards from a speeding, on-coming car?

The second question: Would you, out of haste to reach the ground, jump down from the 3rd floor of this building instead of running down through the staircases? The answers to the two questions were, readily and loudly, "No."I explained that when we decided not to cross the road or jump down the building, we were informed in that decision by our sense of history or historical mindedness by which we were able to remember how fatal it was in the past for people who crossed roads or jumped down buildings in similar circumstances. When we remembered that we could be knocked down on crossing the road or be crippled on jumping down the building, we were using the lessons of history. This means that the decisions, actions and the options we take are informed by our sense, knowledge and experience of the past, which we have internalised overtime. When we make choices, or take actions or decisions based on our knowledge and experience of the past, we are invariably using the lessons of history. In fact, individuals, organisations, and governments are guided in their decisions, choices, policies, and actions by the knowledge and experience of the past. Thus, history, like science, teaches lessons.

The lessons of history are intimately related to the issue of prediction, which scientists think is unobtainable in history. My simple reaction is that the lessons of history are innately predictive. Put differently, the predictions of history are within the womb of the lessons of history. To explain further, within every lesson of history there is a prediction. For example, we decided not to cross the road because the lessons of history had informed us in advance that we would be knocked down by the car if we crossed. This advanced information or warning, which dissuaded us from crossing the road, is the prediction of history.Predictions are conclusions or statements of what would happen in the future under given circumstances or conditions, and their ultimate aim, irrespective of their degree of accuracy, is to guide our actions against the future. On this premise, we can conclude that history has fulfilled its predictive role, as it is indisputably a guide to action.

Finally, let us revisit the most often claim that history is subjective, unlike science, which is objective (Carr. 62. Evans www.Palgrave.com/History). Naturally, scientists think that science is uniquely and fundamentally founded upon a universal tool called "The scientific method" (Kapitza 3). They think that objectivity in science is founded upon the application of the scientific method, which they claim cannot be used in the study of disciples which deal with human experiences involving the mind (Miller and Harley 12). It is necessary at this point to ask the question. What essentially is the scientific method? The two eminent scientists, Miller and Harley, would answer the questions as follows:

Scientists rely on observations, so the methods used in these observations must be based on a frame of minds allowing investigators to analysean occurrence objectively. This frame of mind is called the scientific method…. The scientific method is a frame of mind that helps ensure objective observations…. Therefore the scientific method depends on repeated investigations by scientists for confirmation of experimental results (12).

Except for its experimental element, the scientific method is well fitted into the methods of historical inquiry. History also relies on observation. Since history is concerned with the explanation of human actions, the historian, as indicated by Thomas Blundeville, "depends on a close observation of details" or evidence (Haddock 20). As in science, objectivity is the duty and hallmark of the historian. For this reason, the historian employs all the possible techniques of historical verification which, despite his biases, would lead him to the truth. That is why, as R.I. Marshal (1-44) has shown in his *The Historical Criticism of Documents,* the historian engages in a rigorous evaluation of the evidence available to him as well as uses various techniques, including the interdisciplinary approach, to obtain knowledge of the past. Thus

objectivity is achieved as the historian is led to his conclusions, not by personal choice, but by the evidence that has been thoroughly scrutinised. This is called "the critical method", the equivalent of the scientific method.

The scientific method is similar to the methods used by historians in making objective conclusions, except that the historian does not rely on experiments in ascertaining the veracity of conclusions. Recently, however, John Lewis Gaddis (https://www.amazon.com) has correctly argued, that not all the sciences use physical experiments either, stressing that history uses methods and techniques similar to those used by paleontology, geology, and evolutionary biology, since both require thought experiments. Let us, however, point out that the use of physical experiments in confirming historical conclusions cannot be completely ruled out in history, especially given its growing scientific nature. After all, for more than four decades or so, history has been using the carbon dating technique in establishing the age of historical artifacts. Other experimental techniques have also been used in identifying remains and relics such as bones, ivory, precious stones, bronze, gold, iron, and other metals. Recently, an eminent Nigerian historian, Y. A. Ochefu (lecture), has suggested and further demonstrated how the use of "supercomputers with specially designed applications and advanced algorithms", used in "Historical Genetics", can be applied to the study of intergroup relations and cultural history by historians. Controlled investigations, which are deemed by social scientists to perform the essential logical functions of experiments in non-experimental services (Bassey 28), are also being used in historical inquiry. That is why it is possible for an investigation into any historical phenomenon to be repeated by other historians in order to determine the validity of earlier conclusions.

CONCLUSION

History and science are fundamentally similar. Both are concerned with reality and the pursuit of truth: history with the reality of the past, science of natural occurrence. Both are of great utilitarian nature and a dependable guide to present and future action. Both are objectively committed to the search for knowledge as it relates to man and his environment. Thus history is a science, not arts.

It is more fruitful, therefore, for scholars to seek to develop the methods and techniques which would enhance greater objectively in history than to engage in the unrewarding sophistry of whether or not history is a science. History is irresistibly advancing as a science, and the earlier historians are able to develop the necessary scientific mindedness and reposition themselves in line with the changing nature of history the better.

REFERENCES

1. *Bassey, Celestine O. "Theory and Research Process in Social Studies in Nigeria: A synthesis and Evaluation of the state of Debate in Political Science." Annals of the Social Science Academy of Nigeria. 3 January – December (2000): 17-38.*
2. *Carr. E.H. What is History? London: Macmillan, 1961.*
3. *Evans, Richard J. In Defense of History, www.Palgrave.com/history, June 2011.*
4. *Gaddis, John L. The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past, https://www.amazon.com/Landscape-History-How-Historians-Past/dp/0195171578 Inspected 24 August, 2018.*
5. *Haddock B.A. An Introduction to Historical Through London: Arnold, 1980*

6. *Kapitza, Serguei. "The Unity of Science and Diversity of Culture." ICUS International Conference on the Unity of Sciences Report 4. 1 January, 1992:3-4.19-23*
7. *Marshal, R.I.The Historical Criticism of Documents. London: Historical Association. 1990.*
8. *Marwick, Arthur. The New Nature of History: knowledge, Evidence, Language. 1st Ed. London:. Macmillan, 2001.*
9. *Miller, Stephen A. and John P. Harley. Zoology. London: WC Brown, 1996.*
10. *Ochefu, Y.A. "Historical Genetics and Archaeo-Genetics: How Useful a Methodology in the Examination of some Existing Assumptions on Intergroup Relations in the Benue Valley?" Lecture, Department of History, Nassarawa State University, Nigeria, May 2011.*
11. *Schaffer, Simon. "What is the History ofScience." What is History Today? Ed. Juliet Gardiner. London: Mammilla, 1988:73-75.*
12. *Shaping, Stephen. "What is the History of Science?" What is History Today? Ed. Julliet Gardiner. London: Macmillan, 1988:71-73.*