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Teaching notes

Not all history is biased

John Sprague

The historian's craft is not merely about the past, it is about *problems* or issues arising from immediate experience:

'Some present state of affairs is always the occasion of the reconstruction of a past event.'

One is confronted with some problem that one seeks to solve through a reconstruction of the past situation, which has given rise to this immediate problem. The focus is on the current situation, question or problem facing the historian and the historian's understanding of that event. The focus shifts from wondering what happened in the *past* to using knowledge to solve *present* issues.

Historical understanding is a link between the current question, the past and the present. For example:

- How does *this* document impact my understanding of the role of the SS in various war atrocities?
- How does *this* inscription impact my understanding of the role of women in the early Christian Church?
- What do *these* soggy ruins of the Mary Rose tell me about how she sank?
- What do *this* building's ruins tell me about the Roman occupation of Britain?

History is reconstructing past events

For Dewey the 'reconstruction of a past event' is not merely pointing out or describing some event. No such 'isolated' understanding of an event is possible. For it to be a historical 'event' it must have had a sequential context — other events before it and after it which will make sense of it.

Therefore because it is an 'event' he suggests that *reconstructing* it means placing it within a sequence of other events, before it and after it (play with reconstructing the event/artefact by placing it within an sequence), leading up to the present experience with which you have a problem...

The historian, then, in a sense reaches back from the present 'problematic' situation, and seeks a solution for that problem through a historical explanation which links that past 'event' to the present situation.

Narrative

How, then, does the historian link the past events sequentially with the present problem so that the explanation can be a *solution* to the problem?

The historian's tool for Dewey is **narrative**. It is through narrative that the historian links the past event with the present. The historian tells a 'story' about the artefact which links its past with the immediate present.

Selection in history

Importantly, 'selection' is not synonymous with 'bias'.

'All historical construction [i.e. historical narrative] is necessarily selective.'

Selection occurs in various ways.

The selection of the people who are being studied

- Those persons about whom the historian writes will have chosen to express particular experiences in particular ways.
- Not everything a person does gets 'recorded' in the historical repository.

The selection of the researcher

- This depends on the kind of *problem/question* that the historian wishes to ask, and what sort of *historical narrative* the historian wishes to tell.
- Depending upon what sort of narrative, and what the narrative is *about*, the historian will weigh various facts differently and actually *decide* what constitutes a 'historical fact'.
- For example, a historical narrative about one's family may include 'facts' about a *particular* soldier in, say, the D-Day landings, but a historical narrative about European history may take the D-Day landings as a single event, largely ignoring the facts about a single soldier.

Implications

Can history be 'true'? For Dewey, truth in a historical inquiry is a relative claim about 'how well the "historical explanation" solves the initial problem which occasioned the construction of the historical narrative'. If the problem has not been solved by the historical narrative then the narrative is not complete (enough).

There can be no context-free judgement in the form 'it happened this way'. Any claim to truth must be consistent with the evidence at hand and the general form of the story being told. Historical narratives, Dewey says, can be 'grounded' in the terms of the narrative (the context/constraints of the questions being asked), and in terms of the verification of the claims used in the narrative (the actual evidence), by whomever is writing the historical narrative: Each new generation will create a new narrative.

Activity

Apply these ideas to a collection of photographs or other 'artefacts':

- How are these artefacts connected with the present?
- What are the 'immediate problems' which demand a 'solution'?
- Can we determine what *sort* of facts these are? Are they facts about society, the economy, the military, human psychology?
- What *sort* of narrative would therefore be most appropriate here? Are there alternatives?
- How can we 'ground' or 'justify' any one narrative better than another?

- What do *these* particular artefacts say about *me*? How does knowledge about myself change in relation to the narrative that I ultimately construct?
- In Dewey's view, what, ultimately, would the historian be interested in: 'what really happened' or these artefacts?
- What particular issues might arise depending on my relationship to the artefacts?
- Would it be possible for me to create an unbiased historical account? Is it possible for *any* historian to create an unbiased account?

Sources

John Dewey (1938) *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*

Burleigh Taylor Wilkins (1959) 'Pragmatism as a Theory of Historical Knowledge: John Dewey on the Nature of Historical Inquiry', www.jstor.org/stable/1905121

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