

“The Study of History: What is the Past” Chapter 15
Summary/excerpts taken from Man is the Measure by Reuben Abel
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Reuben Abel asks a very intriguing question, “Why should philosophers be concerned with the study of history? Isn’t the past irrevocably fixed?” He concludes that, “History would indeed be of limited philosophical interest were it not that men, unlike animals, are what they have come to be” (164). Animals have no meaningful history. But history is not fixed. It is not merely the recording of facts, because “new facts are discovered, because **history is “always written wrong. . . The past is a steady process of imaginative reinterpretation and reconstruction; we want it to be meaningful to us in the present”** (165).

The chronicler must arrange the facts. No one event per se is history. No newspaper can publish all the news. Someone must decide what is “fit to print” (165). This process is influenced by a number of factors:

1. **Our interests change:** we probably care less now about the love affairs of the French kings than about how the French peasantry lived. (Our histories of ancient Rome tell as much about us as they tell about the ancient Romans; this is again a problem of **cultural relativity**). [No one can fully understand an alien culture; he is constrained by his own culturally bound assumptions. “Both primitive and modern men are imprisoned in a universe of discourse—a language game or a form of life. The primitive man’s belief in magic is tied into a worldview or conceptual structure that defines “reality” and “rationality” What is magic for them may not be magic for us, but the converse is also true] (Abel, Chapter 11, “The Social Sciences,” Man is the Measure, pages 123-125.
2. **Our conceptual apparatus changes:** We now have available to us, for example, the Marxist hypothesis that the American Civil War was a class conflict, and the Freudian insight into why Martin Luther was rebellious.
3. **Our view of the basic historical segment changes:** Arnold Toynbee 1889-1975 holds the most intelligent unit to be not the nation but the “society” (he cites five since A.D. 775: Western Christianity, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and the Far East). [According to Toynbee’s hypothesis, the failure of a civilization to survive was the result of its inability to respond to moral and religious challenges, rather than to physical or environmental challenges”] Braudel (French historian 1902-1985), however, chooses “The Mediterranean” as his unit. [One uses a camera view that is from a long shot; one chooses a view that is a close up.]
4. **The “personal equation” (interests and idiosyncrasies) of the historian changes.**
5. **The audience for whom he writes changes;** this may have an effect on his selection and organization.

For all of these reasons the “**Baconian fallacy**” seems all the more ludicrous, that all the historian has to do is collect the facts, or than Mach’s view that “the bare data confront us.” Sir Lewis Namier, 1888-1960, English historian, wrote:

The function of the historian is more like a painter and not of a photographic camera; to discover and set forth, to single out and stress that which is the nature of the thing and not to reproduce indiscriminately all that meets the eye.

But even the photographer must select, focus, arrange, emphasize, organize, evaluate, compose, define, and omit; he, too, searches for the “nature of the thing.” As Carl Becker put it, echoing Voltaire, history “must play on the dead whatever tricks it finds necessary for its own piece of mind.” The garment we wear called the past is remodeled for us to conform to the new styles.

Just as the geologist infers the “pastness” or age of the rock he is examining now, so the historian critically inspects memoirs, letters, diaries, newspapers, artifacts, etc., and infers a past history. History differs from geology in that the historian attributes meaning to his data. He looks at three standing stones and says, this was a Druid temple (166).

Patterns and Selectivity

The patterns said to be found in past events are selected by the historian; like the hypotheses of the scientist, they may be suggested, but are neither imposed nor dictated, by the “facts” (167).

The historian looks for patterns just like the hypotheses of the scientist. Was the Industrial Revolution, or the Gothic Age, or the Hundred Years War evident to those who participated in it? The sexual revolution, the revolution in the Catholic Church, were they apparent within society at the time? What will historians say about this age? What exists are individual persons doing things one at a time, “a wilderness of single instances” (167).

And yet it is man’s penchant to look for patterns, to interpret, to predict. [Sometimes these interpretations are incorrect. For example:]

Columbus’ landing place has recently been reidentified and it has been suggested that he discovered America in 1467, not 1492. A Finnish historian finds that the Russian winter of 1812, which is supposed to have destroyed Napoleon’s army, was a mild one. The Catholic Church has recently “decanonized” St. Christopher – it seems there never was such a person. In brief, the hard core of indisputable facts is not so very hard. Ranke demands that history tell us “wie es eigentlich gewesen”; but there is no such thing as “the way it really happened.” The past in Dewey’s phrase, is always “the past-of-the-present”(168).

But these considerations do not make history incurably slanted, partial, relativistic, nonobjective, or mythical:

“Just as science is self-correcting, so different historical accounts may be confronted, compared, and contrasted; emphasis and bias may be made manifest; evidence may be scrutinized; arguments may be evaluated. The alternative to absolutism does not have to be nihilism; just because we don’t have certainty about the past, it does not follow that anything goes” (168).

My note: [This quote would be appropriate for ToK prescribed title # 8 (the historian’s ability to analyse evidence scientifically) #2 (the decay of untruth) or #4 (What makes evidence strong enough?)]

Frameworks of Historiography

Let us examine some of the frameworks or hypotheses that historians have used as implicit bases for selecting facts and exhibiting their interconnections (their philosophy of history).

1. **History is cyclical**; The Persians, Babylonians, and Hindus believed that it repeats itself endlessly. Is this view naïve? Alexander Goldenweiser argues that there is only a limited number of possible solutions to most problems of human life.
2. A second group of philosophers of history may be called **functional** because of the way in which they isolate and stress certain **causative factors**:

Buckle, for example, believes that the history of civilization depends on **climate, soil, and geography**. Personality is affected by diet; maturity is in part of function of climate; Ancient Greece and Rome, situated near swamps, were almost wiped out by malaria. . . . Inland peoples will probably not invent canoes, but coastal peoples—the ancient Peruvians, for example—likewise may not.

[There are exceptions, counterclaims}: The Hopis and Navahos, in almost identical geographical circumstances, have vastly different cultures. Although the Fiji Islands are cold and stormy, the natives wear no clothing; in torrid Uganda the people are fully clad. Thus a functional theory of history has both strengths and weaknesses (169).

3. **Race** is stressed by historians as ancient as Tacitus (who contrasted the virtues of the unspoiled Germans with the vices of the decadent Romans) and as modern as the Frenchman Gobineau and the Anglo-Saxon H.S. Chamberlain. Both were anti-Semitic advocates of Nordic supremacy (170),

4. **Psychological factors** are identified by Freud . . . as the moving force in history. In this view, civilization results from the sublimation of deep impulses and unconscious basic drives: Eros (libido, or sex drive) and Thanatos (the death wish) are personified as the causative factors in history (170). [My note: this would certainly explain the attraction of war]
5. The Communist Manifesto begins, “ The history of all hitherto existing society is the **history of class struggles**.” Marxism is not the only theory of **economic determinism**; Charles Beard’s interpretation of how the American Constitution was adopted is another example. The modes of economic life and the relations of production are deemed to explain the legal, political, intellectual, religious, and other “ideological” aspects of a society and its history (170).
6. Carlyle said, “The history of the World is but the **Biography of Great Men**.” Emerson and James also found the motive power of history to be the appearance of superior individuals.

Counterclaim: What happens when two functional theories conflict? How could the communist revolution have succeeded without Lenin? How can Marxist economic determinism be reconciled with Lenin’s apparent indispensability? Lenin would somehow have been produced, according to Trotsky, because he. “ . . .was not an accidental element in the historical development, but a product of the whole past of Russian history . . . (171).

This analysis is not unlike Kautsky’s claim that, had Napoleon died in 1785, another soldier would have risen from the ranks to perform Napoleon’s historic task! (171).

The Idea of **Progress** in history is relatively new. History is a great drama of sin and redemption, according to the Christian view. Some believe history is a living organism (organismic theory). Spengler, for instance, believes that all civilizations grow, from infancy, through youth, maturity, and senility, to death (172). Some account for history as a *Zeitgeist*, or spirit of the age, to account for cultural phenomena. These theories explain Gothic cathedrals as a manifestation of the “Gothic spirit.”

Counterclaim: Cathedrals may have simply been a solution to certain problems of engineering and economics. Stone was then widely used for building because of the fear of fire in wooden buildings; ceilings were necessarily heavy, and supporting walls had to be very thick. The invention of the flying buttress and the ribbed vault distributed the weight of the structure and made possible thinner walls and larger openings.

There is no single dominant outlook, or *Weltanschauung*, that influences the arts (172). The pointed arch is also to be found in Islamic architecture. Nothing in English painting corresponds to the poetry and drama produced in the Elizabethan era. The skyscraper has nothing in common with atonality in music. It is convenient to use such general concepts as the “spirit of an epoch,” but they have not explanatory or predictive value . . . (173).