

ON THE POSSIBILITY OF WRITING CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

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Abstract

Traditional historians limit the scope of history to events which occurred outside living memory. The main concern is whether it is possible to study the contemporary period objectively using a scientific approach. From the traditional historians' point of view, a historian who studies his own time cannot be objective, and cannot adopt a scientific approach successfully. Their belief is that events as recent as fifty years ago should not be the study of historians. As a result of this point of view, contemporary history is still struggling to gain recognition. This essay will analyse some of the problem areas concerning contemporary history and will examine the accuracy of the traditionalist claims and the possibility of writing a valid contemporary history.

Keywords: History, Historiography, Contemporary History.

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Introduction

Traditional historians limit the scope of history to events which occurred outside living memory. For them, as Reichmann (1960:191) points out, contemporary history¹ is “*too near, too closely interwoven with our lives, too much part of our destiny and our prejudices and passions*”, and it is therefore not yet ready to be researched. The main concern is whether it is possible to study the contemporary period objectively using a scientific approach. From the traditional historians’ point of view, a historian who studies his own time cannot be objective, and cannot adopt a scientific approach successfully. Their belief is that events as recent as fifty years ago should not be the study of historians. Because of this point of view, contemporary history is still struggling to gain recognition. This essay will examine the accuracy of the traditionalists claims and the possibility of writing a valid contemporary history.

The accusation of “present-mindedness” is of course even more valid of contemporary history, which rapidly gained ground in England in the second half of the sixties. Just as was the case of Germany and elsewhere, contemporary history was, for a long time, not regarded as history. English history after 1878 was not part of the programme of studies in Oxford in 1914- and this was probably the case at other universities in Britain- the absence of contemporary history in schools until the 1960s is also a well-known phenomenon. The result of this was that politicians and high civil servants, who were educated in this tradition at the public schools and universities often knew more about the ancient Greeks and Romans than about the world of their own time (Woodward, 1966: 2; Toesbes, 1987: 176).

The following arguments against contemporary history were still to be heard until well into the sixties (Burston, 1967; Watt, 1970; Woodward, 1966).

- There was an absence of the necessary distance in time, necessary for an objective assessment of the recent past
- The contemporary historian can only be aware of consequences and the results of the events he has studied, to a very limited degree, i.e. the short term facts. He has an inadequate perspective.
- The material is too extensive, particularly on the world scale, This favours specialization and, as a consequence, makes the material less accessible to a broad public and makes it more difficult to present an overall view.
- The material has too many limitations; there is an official embargo on documents of between 30 and 50 years.

There was also the fear that the status of academic history would be reduced to that of journalism (Remond, 1967: 36). As far as teaching was concerned, some claimed that 15-16 year old pupils were not interested in worldwide problems (Heater, 1965: 47; Toebes, 1987: 177).

Discussion

First, it is necessary to analyse some of the problem areas concerning contemporary history. That is to say; problems such as that of definition, the nature of evidence, the problem of perspective and indefinite scope: just some of the problems facing contemporary historians.

It should be emphasised that the definition of contemporary history is a fundamental problem. According to Barraclough (1966: 6) “*contemporary*” is a very elastic term, with a different meaning for different people. For example, today there are people living who remember the Second World War, or who may have met Hitler and Mussolini. On the other hand, for the generations born in the past 30-40 years, these are as much a part of history as Alexander the Great, Suleiman the Magnificent or Queen Victoria. Clearly, it is problem of definition. Barraclough (1966: 6) states that “*(the phrase) contemporary history is the history of definition for simple reason that generations overlap*”.

It is very difficult to make a definite distinction between modern and contemporary history. Interdependence and interaction provide the central theme of world history during the last fifty years. It has been held by some that modern history has ended and that recent or contemporary history has begun (Sen, 2006: 1). It can be said that modern history includes contemporary history, but that contemporary history is not the same as modern history. “*One of the distinctive facts about contemporary history is that it is world history and that the forces shaping it cannot be understood unless we are prepared to adopt worldwide perspective*” (Sen, 2006: 1). Contemporary history is different from modern history in terms of quality and content. As Barraclough (1996: 2) points out, if we look backward from the vantage point of the present, we can see that the years 1890 (when Bismarck withdrew from the political scene) and 1961, (when J. F. Kennedy became President of the United States) were watershed years between modern and contemporary history. However, the tendency of recent historical writing is to draw attention the continuity of history and therefore many historians would question the validity of making a division between “*modern*” and “*contemporary*” history. According to this argument, contemporary history does not warrant its own separate period and it is therefore a part of “*modern*” history.

In general, modern history concentrates on European history and civilisation. However, this “*Eurocentric*” view is not suitable to understanding contemporary world. It is necessary to adopt worldwide perspectives in order to understand the contemporary world. In one sense, twentieth century history is basically the history of the two world wars. However, if history just concentrates on the two world wars, the rest of world history (such as Chinese, Indian and Islamic history) would be disregarded. This would make it impossible to understand the contemporary era, and therefore the new world system.

It is true that the contemporary historian necessarily focuses his attention on more recent events, but this does not mean that his perspective is shorter than that of other historians. In other words, for the most part it is not possible to understand and analyse the contemporary period without employing a broader historical perspective. For example, in order to understand the problems of Northern Ireland, in terms of religious and social structure, the contemporary historian must go back to the seventeenth century. Moreover, to understand the reason behind the Gulf War, the historian must date back to the nineteenth century. Therefore, it can be said that the study of contemporary history requires as much depth of research as earlier periods of history.

In the light of the above, we cannot give any specific date as the start date of contemporary history. For some, it would start 1939 or 1945, whilst for others; contemporary history would begin during the interwar years. Therefore, as Barraclough (1966: 12) points out "*contemporary history begins when the problems which are actual in the world today first take visible shape*". In other words, contemporary history begins when the changes show us that we are moving into new era. For example, it can be claimed that there have been great changes during the twentieth century in terms of the political and economic systems and technology. As Barraclough (1991: 2) points out after 1945 four great changes occurred:

- 1) Globalism: Whatever happens in one part of the world inevitably has an impact on the rest of the world. In other words, all problems are global. It can therefore be said that twentieth century history is world history.
- 2) The great progress in science technology, and its effects on social and intellectual structure.
- 3) In contrast to the United States and the Soviet Union, the declining importance of Europe, and the re-emergence of Asia and Africa.
- 4) The disintegration of the liberal synthesis and the expansion of the communist system.

These changes indicate that we have moved into a new era and therefore, in many senses the twentieth century is not a continuation of the nineteenth century.

As previously mentioned, twentieth century history is world history and this should as wholly different from European-centred nineteenth century history. In particular, following the Second World War, the world began to move in a different direction in terms of political, economical, ideological and technological terms.

One of the important points to bear in mind with regard to contemporary history is that, in many respects, its requirements are the same as "*modern*", "*medieval*" or "*ancient*" history. On the other hand, in terms of working procedure contemporary history is different. In general, traditional history starts at a point in the past -for example 1453 the fall of Constantinople, 1492 the discovery of America or 1789

the French Revolution- and runs from the chosen starting point. On the other hand, the contemporary historian follows a different procedure. In this respect, a genetic approach is not suitable for the contemporary historian.

In light of these points, how can we test the validity of writing a contemporary history? It should be borne in mind that validity of the mechanical application of the fifty (or more) year rule is quite arguable. Rather than arguing about this purely mechanical division, we should consider a more scientific approach and methodology. Bullock (1960: 67) claims that, *“history is a technique and discipline which can be applied to the study of human society in any period, including our own time. In some cases these methods will be successful even when applied to our own time; in other cases they will fall for short of success, even when applied to the history of earlier centuries”*. In other words, it is no more certain that the contemporary historian will fail than it is that the *“ancient”*, *“medieval”* or *“modern”* historian will be successful. Success or failure depends on the historical methods applied on the approach, not the period chosen. So, to what extent is it possible to write a contemporary history? It would appear that we should examine the possibility of writing contemporary history in terms of the availability of sources, objectivity and perspective: the main concerns of a scientific approach.

As far as the availability of sources is concerned twentieth century historians have a vast amount of material, and therefore, with regard to the quantity and range of source material, contemporary historians have a distinct advantage over *“medieval”* and *“classical”* historians: whereas medieval and classical scholars suffer from extreme fragmentation in their sources, having to make interpretations from very limited documents and sources, contemporary historians have more material than they can cope with.

Not only the number of sources but also the nature of evidence has changed. The requirements of the modern society have forced people to record information and this is why contemporary historians are faced with such an enormous number of sources. Therefore, it is not question of the quantity of sources, but rather how one can find and use those sources.

What sources² are available and how and where we can find them? Firstly, government archives are important, containing many documents relating to the First and the Second World Wars. Paris Peace Conference records, the Yalta and Tehran Conference records are invaluable sources for the contemporary historian. The records published by the US State Department and the British Foreign Office are also particularly valuable sources of information. On the other hand, there are many incomplete and inconsistent sources. For example, although there is large amount of material concerning the period from 1933 to 1945 we do not have many documents relating to the Soviet Government. However, it is worth remarking that all historians, not only contemporary historians are faced with the problem of inconsistency, incomplete and unreliable sources. For this reason, historians require

special training in order to be able to interpret the information they are presented with. For example, it is known that whilst they provide a wealth of valuable information, medieval chronicles are not always reliable. It, therefore falls to the historian to interpret the information using his training experience.

One of the great advantages for contemporary historians is the variety of material. As a result, of technological progress the world is now dominated by information and communication systems. There are huge numbers of newspapers, magazines, television stations, political statements, radio stations, experts' announcements and such like providing a permanent record of contemporary events, and in many cases a forum for social comment. Therefore, as in the case of the Water Gate scandal and the illegal selling of arms to Iran during Iran-Iraq War, little avoids the scrutiny of the public eye in one form of the media or an other.

On the one hand, technological progress provides great advantages for the contemporary historian. On the other hand, however, as a result of the increasing use of the telephone the contemporary historian is sometimes faced with great difficulties. As a result of the increasing "*telephone diplomacy*" there is often no written record of crucial decisions and actions.

As far as international relations are concerned, the official documents are of great value to historians, because they offer details of negotiations and bargaining that cannot be found in other sources. Today, historians have more than sufficient sources to study twentieth century international relations and political history. However as Bullock (1960: 69) suggests, these mountains of information can pose their own problem: "*It is certainly difficult work to pick one's way through the marsh of conjecture and half truths, to find solid ground beneath one's feet but it is precisely this which the historian is trained to do*".

Other important sources of contemporary history are local records, international records (treaties, protocols, charters, ambassadors' reports, diplomatic dispatches etc.), university records political parties, private business records, surveys and reports. Apart from these sources, politicians' autobiographies and memories are also important. Nevertheless, it is worth nothing in many cases that these may be unreliable because of their subjective approach. In particular, most politicians are concerned with protecting their positions and they may therefore exaggerate the importance of their own actions. In addition, not surprisingly, they often omit to mention their mistakes. There is little doubt that the lies and misinformation will eventually become known but it again falls to the historian to take pains to provide as accurate information of events as possible by the objective analysis of the sources. Therefore, although their approach may not be scientific or objective, contemporary examination of events by eyewitnesses is an invaluable source of information for any historian.

This leads us to another question: whether or not it is possible for the historian, in dealing with issues with direct or indirect impact on his own life, to practice the objectivity necessary for his work.

It is clearly a problem for a historian to describe objectively the world and events in which he himself is involved and it would be foolish to suggest that personal involvement is an event poses no threat to this objectivity. As Bullock (1960: 70) points out the reason why people have such a great interest in contemporary history is that, they have strong feelings about the political issues of our time, and this in turn makes it impossible for them to think or write impartially.

In general, historians work with fragmentary imperfect and intractable evidence. A scientist would find it difficult to provide results from such data, and there is, thus for historians to employ their interpretative powers. In that sense, it can be said that history is subjective, but otherwise historians are no more prejudiced than other scientists are. It is true that the problems of bias and partisanship are mostly associated with contemporary history. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that these are problems only associated with contemporary history. In other words, there are problems involved with the study of history, whichever period is chosen. In particular, if the subject chosen were related to any sensitive issues (such as religion) it would need special care. The French Medieval historian Marc Bloch (1992: 31) says "*Here, with the nineteenth century, there is little danger, but when you touch the religious wars of the sixteenth century, you must take great care*". This may be seen as the reason why there is such a big difference between Turkish-Arab historians' interpretation of the Crusades and that of European historians. In this sense, it is not only difficult for the historian writing about the contemporary period, but also difficult for any historian writing about any controversial period of history. From this point of view, what the historian has to do is to try to overcome his prejudices. The problem of bias occurs if there is a weakness in the scientific approach, and "*the weakness of the scientific approach can be overcome only by redoubling our care and honesty*" (Braudel, 1980: 66).

Is it possible for historians to be completely impartial in their work? Do historians necessarily need to be neutral? Has an objective history ever been written?

Historians have their own ideas the same as everyone else. And, these ideas, in conjunction with a historian's background, consciously or subconsciously have an influence on his work. Even if two historians were to use the same sources, their interpretation of events would be different. However, this does not indicate failure. Rather it is a question of which point of view is sought. Moreover, a historian cannot and should not necessarily seek to be neutral. What he must do, however is be "*less quick to make up his mind than the man who has not had his training*" (Bullock, 1960: 70). Personally, I do not believe that a wholly objective history has been written yet. However, that is not to say that historians written today will not be accepted as objective fifteen to twenty years after. It is arguable to what degree objectivity can be tested.

Another important advantage for the contemporary historian is that he/she is able to remember the influence of events. In addition, he/she can also remember the public opinion or public reaction of the period, and he/she is therefore more easily able to utilize the atmosphere of the period. Furthermore, he/she has the opportunity to consult other contemporaries and to check his/her own recollections.

Apart from the problems of incomplete and inadequate sources and of bias or subjectivity, there is another problem relating to contemporary history, which can be called "*lack of perspective*". The question we have to answer is whether it is possible for a contemporary historian to see recent events in a proper perspective. With regard to this although traditional views of perspective are not wholly wrong, they might easily cause error. In some cases, perspective has no meaning, for example, when an event is over. What we mean by the term perspective is the standpoint of new generations with regard to the past. One thing, which should be remembered, is that this standpoint may easily change, not just because of newfound evidence, but because a historians' new experience may have given him a new perception and new understanding. For example a twentieth century American historian does not see the American Civil War in the same light as a nineteenth century historian. Perhaps, the most obvious example, however, is that of our current concept of the Middle Ages which is quite different from that of an eighteenth or nineteenth century historian. This is because our experience has given us a new point of view, a new perception. This is one of the main reasons why each generation has the desire to rewrite recent history and particularly to re-examine controversial issues.

It is true that having after knowledge is important to the historian to some extent in understanding a situation fully. However, as Woodward (1966:4) points out "*one of the difficult tasks of the historian is to avoid singling out events which, in the light of after knowledge, are seen to have had important consequences, but which could not have had any special significance to contemporaries*". The reason that the contemporary historians of the time did not understand the significance of those events is simply that they did not know what would occur next.

On the other hand, having after knowledge is necessary if history is to be written at all. In history the link between first and second event, the link between reason and results is quite important. History requires intelligibility and knowledge with regard to following the order of events to build links between the events. Therefore, the contemporary historian needs to be aware of what happened following the event with which he is dealing. It is known that although Thucydides collected material for his history during the Peloponnesian War but that he did not start writing until after the war was over. Today the historian writing about the seventeenth or eighteenth century Ottoman reform attempts knows that those reforms were not radical enough to protect the Empire from collapse. On the other hand, the historian writing about the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East does not yet know what the outcome of this conflict will be.

Although problems with perspective are mostly associated with contemporary history rather than earlier periods, the other problems mentioned above are common to all periods of history. The differences are dissimilarities of degree rather than differences of kind.

In spite of these difficulties and disadvantages, why should a historian have an obligation to be interested in the history of his own time? Firstly, as in the case of other professions, the historian has an obligation as a member of society. He should help people to understand not only what happened in the distant past, but also what has occurred during their own lifetimes. Moreover, there is a public demand for a better understanding of the recent past in order to understand what is happening in the world. In particular, in the twentieth century international relations have become far more complex than that they used to be. Naturally, people are interested in their own time and we cannot blame those who are more interested in current affairs than in Ancient Rome or the Greeks. In short, the public's special demands for understanding of current events have forced historians to study the contemporary period.

Secondly, if historians did not deal with contemporary history, this area would be left to the people who may provide false information or speculative knowledge about recent events. There are some grounds for this fear: Bullock (1960: 73-74) says "*there is no more powerful force of propaganda in moving people to anger and indignation, in string up political, racial and religious passions than false history*". Some examples from the past show just how serious a danger this is. The most well known example is perhaps that of Hitler. In every speech, his main theme was his own version of what had happened to German people after they had been defeated in the First World War. Following the Treaty of Versailles, the German people felt cheated and humiliated, and consequently it was not so difficult for Hitler to manipulate them. The result was the Second World War, which claimed millions of lives worldwide.

It goes without saying that Hitler was not the only politician who used speculative false history. It is a fact that, history in many countries is designed to meet national needs or to serve government interests. In these circumstances, it is questionable whether the contemporary historian can write about his own time without interference from the political regime. James Sheehan explains "*the invention of a nation always involves the invention of a national past, an established version of the nation's creation which absorbs or overwhelms alternative points of view*". In this respect, nationalism has always been supported by historical work. That is the reason why so many leaders have tried to re-create their recent past. For example, the Soviet Union is famous for having written and re-written its history. After victory, Stalin not only eliminated Trotsky from historical accounts, but also destroyed documents in the archives relating to the October Revolution in which Lenin praised Trotsky. There are many such examples especially in countries governed by a communist regime.

What kind of responsibility does a historian have to society? How can we assess the limits of these responsibilities? One of the most important responsibilities of a historian is to contend with propaganda myths and lies about the past. Today the world in which we live is too complicated for many to understand. Modern society has its own problems and dilemmas, which force people to seek help to escape from them. Therefore, people look to historians to tell them how and why they got into this situation, and what is the best way out of it. And if historical knowledge has the ability to prepare people for the future in theory a knowledge of contemporary history might help prevent individuals (or even whole societies) making the same mistake twice (though in practice this is rarely achieved).

What is important is that if we reject contemporary history as a serious academic subject, we may be faced with a serious problem. As Woodward (1960: 2, 12) points out, at the beginning of twentieth century, the English governing class had less knowledge about the contemporary world than they had about the ancient world. Therefore, they did not have sufficient understanding of the dangers threatening the peace in Europe. Because of this ignorance of contemporary history, when First World War began in 1914, many were unprepared. It can therefore be argued we should strive for a better knowledge of contemporary history in order to avoid such lack of readiness in the future.

Now the situation has completely changed. In particular in Great Britain and other English speaking countries, there is a great deal of knowledge about contemporary history. We are therefore, now in danger of going too far the other way of ignoring older history at the expense of contemporary history. In particular, in the United States the tendency in historical studies is too much on contemporary history and neglect other periods of history. However, it should be emphasised that “*continuity*” is also a very important feature of history, and older periods should not be neglected at the expense of more recent periods. Naturally, the public demand for understanding of recent events has forced historians to study the contemporary period. However, such a concentration of scholars on the contemporary period is unsuitable for the nature of history: It does not provide a balanced view of the world. A historian, who only has knowledge of the contemporary period, does not deserve the title of historian.

Conclusion

Today, there is a general crisis in all the human sciences, including history, because they are all overwhelmed by the speed of their own progress. From time to time, all sciences find it necessary to redefine and re-examine themselves. Historians are also aware of the changes in the world forcing them to re-examine their aims, methods and functions. Because of the speed of their own progress, not only history but also all human sciences are now engaged in redefining their aims, their methods and their priorities.

Today's historians appear to have a sense of belonging to different age. Not only their answers but also their questions are different from those of their predecessors. They are no longer happy about old conceptions of history, ideas formulated thirty or fifty years ago. Their approach to the problems and materials is also different from that of their predecessors. Because of these changes, there is a new attempt to see history as the science of man in time. Another important change is the widening of the historian's scope, both in terms of time and space. Because of these new trends, many historians have begun studying the contemporary period. In particular, in recent years social history has become an important part of historical studies. In addition to this since the French Revolution, ordinary people have taken important role within society and political systems, and we are now living in the "age of the common man". Therefore, the history of today is concerned with the world of the ordinary man. Therefore as Reichmann (quoted in Beloff 1960: 193) points out "When history is dealt with from a sociological viewpoint we are not only allowed, but indeed are obliged to overcome respect for temporal and spatial distance and use to the full all the potentialities of contemporary history writing".

Finally, it should be emphasised that if historians only concentrate on the contemporary period it will hinder our understanding of the secrets of the past. However, it cannot be said that the contemporary period should not be studied at all because of a "lack of perspective". It is true that contemporary history has its own problems, but it also has its own advantages. As a social scientist, a historian should not turn his back on the present and should not put a gap of fifty years between himself and his responsibilities. As Braudel (1980: 69) says "...history is a study of society, of the whole of society, and thus of the past and thus equally of the present, past and present inseparable". Lucien Febvre (quoted in Braudel 1980: 38) adds, "History, science of the past, science of the present". The present can help our understanding of the past only if the present itself is made comprehensible.

"I have no expectation," wrote Emerson (2006: 6), "that any man will read history aright who thinks that what was done in a remote age, by men whose names haave resounded far, has any deeper sense than what he is doing today".

NOTES

¹a) The history of one's own lifetime b) The history of the twentieth century, or some segment thereof c) A historical method that uses present concerns as criteria for selecting problems for study in the past. The expression *contemporary history* has become popular since 1945, primarily as a label for work that deal with the "recent past" –roughly understood as the twentieth century- or, more broadly, for studies of any period whose time frame is the historian's own life span. A few scholars also understand contemporary history as a method of selection, according to which one chooses the historical subjects one studies on the basis of present issues and concerns" (Ritter, 1986: 65).

²For more information about various sources of contemporary history see Brian Brivati, Julia Buxton and Anthony Seldon (Ed.), *The Contemporary History Handbook*, Manchester University Press 1996, pp. 217-462.

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