

Uses, Themes, and Theories of History

Robert Milton Underwood, Jr.

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During the Middle Ages, history was thought to represent “the inexorable unfolding of Divine Providence, from the creation ... to the Last Judgement” (Tosh 27). This belief was the essence of determinism—that man was predestined to fulfill the divine will. From the eighteenth century onward, history was decreasingly thought to be caused by God and increasingly thought to be caused by mankind. As we became more aware that we created our own destiny, it was of value to look into the past to see how we could improve our futures. There are various thematic approaches to and theories of the study of history, all of which can be appreciated in terms of how it shows history to be useful to us.

Some people think that nothing of substantive value can be learned from history. But whoever believes this will surely find that it is self-fulfilling. Thus, those that believe that nothing can be learned from history will surely “find nothing” of value, or else they will discount every possible thing of value to be learned. Studying history is useful in that it offers insight into the human condition. The object is to increase man’s understanding of, and mastery over, his environment.

Historical awareness must be taken seriously. There is much to learn about, and much to learn from. Learning *about* history involves details, facts, events and leads to enhanced awareness and knowledge. Learning *from* history helps us build on the past with improvements (e.g., learning from past mistakes) for enrichment and enhanced wisdom.

Historical reference lies at the heart of the discipline’s assertion to be relevant to the study of societies. It constitutes our most important cultural resource. We wouldn’t even know we were a culture without historical reference. By looking back, we see what we have done, observe how we are alike and how we are different, and we acknowledge who we are as a

collective whole.

There is usually more than one way of interpreting events or responding to a situation. We often find that we had a tremendous number of choices. The importance of realizing how many choices there actually were helps us in the present to examine possible choices that are currently available to us for issues at hand. History is thus a valuable reference point.

Learning about history helps us make better decisions. In self reflection, a question may be asked such as, “What if I had made a different decision?” We obviously can’t go back and change a decision. But we can learn from it. When multiple choices are available and only one may be chosen, it is usually selected because it was deemed to be the most prudent choice at the time. It was the best choice, or the least bad one, based on what we have learned from the past. Sometimes the choice turns out to be a bad one, but it was based on the best evidence available at the time. More learning can occur as a result of the mistake, and perhaps better decisions can be made the next time.

Galileo Galilei, the Italian astronomer and mathematician who was born in 1564, declared that the earth revolved around the sun and was ridiculed at the time by the intellectuals of the day. He was tried by the Papal court, and was condemned to spend the rest of his life in his residence under armed guard. We can now see that his orbital hypothesis was right all along. We can learn from the arrogant and close-minded mistakes made by his critics. Of value in the present is to ask ourselves in what way might we be just as close-minded about one or more issues of the day.

There seem to be recurring patterns in history. But just because we see similarities or similar patterns doesn’t mean that history repeats itself. No one historical situation can ever be repeated in every particular detail. Drawing analogies, even if they are not fully valid in all

regards, is a part of human reasoning. Things have changed with German fascism since World War II, at least as far as their political structure is concerned. But are there any patterns still existing that could lead to a resurgence of bigotry and racism again? The problem with looking for patterns and giving them credence is that we tend to judge too much too early. The Japanese visiting or living in the United States after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 were held in interment camps. Detainees are currently held at Guantánamo Bay. Did we learn anything from these detentions that were based solely on the nationalities of the detainees? Hopefully we have, and perhaps the difference is that we didn't know where the sentiments of the Japanese detainees lay at the time. Those being held at Guantánamo Bay are there because it is suspected that we know where their sentiments are aligned. Perhaps we have learned that it is best to be on the safe side if we are not sure whether or not someone sympathizes with terrorists.

Why study history? We spend a lot of time there anyway through remembering and reminiscing. We also spend some time thinking about the future, through imagining and planning. To think about where we have come from and where we currently are helps set the course for where we are going. The dimension of time moves with us every moment. We live in the present, but we take with us fragments of the past and glimpses of the future in our minds. The study of history is a personal pursuit which enables the individual to achieve some self awareness by stepping outside his or her immediate experience. As we move through our lives always being physically in the present, we can reflect back on the past, or project forward into the future. We should be careful in contemplating the future since it is always partly shaped by factors that cannot be predicted.

Another reason to study history is just for the fun of it. It is fun and interesting to learn about things that have happened. There is entertainment and amusement value in the study of

prior events. People also find ancestral value when they study family history. There are relics of the past that we observe when growing up such as old photos, vases, trinkets and other items in the homes of older generations of family members. We see mementos from the past and want to know how those items were used and valued.

Some histories get more attention than others. For example, World War II and the Cold War get far more attention from the media and historians than do histories of seemingly lesser importance, like the history of the agricultural industry. Some would think that issues of lesser importance are peripheral to “real history.” But there are things to be learned from all segments of history

There are many histories that still need to be researched, especially since we are a global community now. History is a study with many specializations, and those specializations can be categorized in terms of various broad types and themes. Three broad areas of thematic historical study are political, economic, and social history. These three broad areas can be subdivided into still more categories.

Political history is the study of all aspects having to do with the organization of power. This study includes aspects of leadership, the way power can be manipulative, and the way various groups or actions vie for control of a political entity, be it a city, state, or country. Political history is considered the senior branch of history because it has been a part of the structural organization of people throughout most of human history (Tosh 110). Also, the state has been largely responsible for the recording of history in ancient times, up to and including the present.

Diplomatic history involves the interaction of representatives of the state with other representatives of independently-run states. Its study includes the issues of war, peace,

negotiations, treaties and foreign policy.

Constitutional history pertains to the organization and structure of rules and guiding principles of a country or state. It also deals with laws, and with issues regarding punishments for breaking those laws. The history of law and administrative history are two major components of constitutional history (Tosh 113).

The study of political, diplomatic and constitutional history are likely to include not only information on countries, but also on notable individuals. Biographical histories are thus written to focus on the accomplishments or contributions of individuals of historical importance. Critics of biographies tend to think that it forces us to see the world narrowly, or with bias through the eyes of one particular individual. But there are several reasons why biographies are useful. One reason is that when a single individual played a significant role, it helps us see how an entire country could be shaped by that individual's direct or indirect influence. Another reason that biographies are useful is that information about little-known individuals can show us that each individual plays a valid role in society, no matter how small. Thirdly, biographies help uncover contexts of the lives of those whose primary sources of information are used for other researchers. Lastly, biographies go deep enough in the lives of individuals to help us understand motive and intention. And motives and intentions are what help shape decision-making and subsequent actions.

Economic history began as a study of the economic policies of the state, and is related to political history. But as its discipline evolved, more aspects were studied. Two main trends of economic history are business history and the study of the dynamics of growth and decline for an entire economy (Tosh 125).

Social history has become an increasingly expanding theme of study over the past few

decades. Three main areas of study within the thematic category of social history are social problems, issues about everyday life, and issues pertaining to the working classes. Earlier histories tended to focus on the aristocracy, decision-makers, and those who were literate. Those of the working classes were often referenced only marginally in history as labor or consumers.

Other themes of social history have formed over time, including the study of women's history, the study of urban history, and the study of race relations. There are many valid themes to study, but it is also worthy to strive to intertwine all of them. The broad goal is to end compartmentalization and strive for a comprehensive total history (Tosh 133). There are so many little histories within histories that it is sometimes difficult to see a broad picture that includes all of the relevant factors contributing to a condition, cause, or events. In practice, however, total history is far too broad and complex. It is easier to get total understanding on a smaller scale, like that of a town, region, or county. A single locale is significantly easier to research in depth than larger geographically areas.

To explain history, historians often form hypotheses. Then they study to see if evidence is supportive. Hypotheses are actually applications of theory. So, because of certain theories about the nature of society, hypotheses are made which are then held up to scrutiny. It is helpful to understand that there are two different ways to group historical theory. One is more concerned with social theory, and with the nature, structure and evolution of society. The second way attempts to address issues of meaning and representation.

“Social theories arise from the problems presented by three aspects of historical explanation (Tosh 205). First of all, there are various components of the human experience, and there is no system in place by which to link all of those components. Secondly, historians want to know what makes change, and there are many elements to consider in trying to determine a

modus operandi. Also, some historical theorists study the direction towards which history is changing to observe trends.

All of the three problematic aspects of historical explanation leading to the development of theories go from the level of details to a larger picture in an attempt to understand the whole picture. Theoretical history is often believed to be speculative (Tosh 2008), and supporters of this position would argue that it is difficult enough to fully understand one major issue, let alone trying to link other major issues in a linear fashion. Any theory, no matter how seemingly comprehensive, can point to only a part of the evidence available for its support. Also, different conclusions can be reached depending on the questions that were initially asked about an issue.

Another potential problem with theory is that unique events are attempted to be pieced together to fit patterns. This exudes the essence of determinism in that humans seemingly follow patterns of life and existence that are predetermined or common over time. Determinism tends to negate the essence of free will. Humans do indeed play a conscious role in their actions by exercising free will. But the problem with too much free will is that evidence about a position may be rejected outright if contradictory to the position. It is best to have some standard of inclusiveness, and this is often done by the way we naturally organize.

It is part of human nature to categorize and classify. It may be accurate to say that there are over six billion unique individuals in the world. But it is also useful to categorize, in context, to write about one billion *Chinese*, or 50 thousand *Cherokee*, or that 80 percent of those who attended a political rally were *women*. Theory can therefore enhance our understanding of historical events, and it can expose certain factors that don't fit into patterns and which thereby define a situation uniquely.

One major historical theory is that of Marxism. Karl Marx, born in Russia in 1818, was a

great social thinker of the nineteenth century. He began developing his theory by believing in the tremendous importance of human productivity. Humans can improve their productivity over time and with collective efforts. We can create shelter, clothing and can reproduce our own food supply. Marx believed that the only objective view of process through history was based on historical materialism, meaning that everything humans productively participate in is done so as to improve their conditions in terms of their materialistic needs.

Marx believed that society had three constituent levels (Tosh 217). The base level was that of productive forces. The next level was that of productive relations. Respectively, these two levels dealt with materials and labor. These two levels formed the base for which legal and political institutions were formed.

Marx also conceived of three major historical epochs (Tosh 219). They were, in order, Ancient Society, Feudal Society, and Capitalist Society. He thought that socialism was the next logical epoch to follow. He didn't necessarily believe that all humans in societies followed the same evolutionary path, namely that each would be able to move upward in terms of wealth and education. Rather, he identified classes according to their role in the process of production. Marx believed that conflicts between social classes stimulated forward direction at whatever level someone was at in terms of the improvement of the quality of life.

One implication of Marxist theory is that it lends itself to a simplified view of the world, and it tends to have a bias favoring those who are involved in progress. Marx fairly acknowledged that understanding history was difficult when he wrote, "... our difficulties begin ... when we set about the observation and the arrangement ... of our historical material ..." (Tosh 223). He never developed a clear methodology of history, but that is one of the shortcomings of any theoretical approach to history.

One major weakness of Marxism is in its reliance on observing humanity by social class. There are other ways that could be included to more comprehensively identify humanity, including, for example, through the use of religious identity and racial identity.

Regardless of any shortcomings of the Marxist view of history, there was and still is strong appeal for its positive qualities. It offered a useful way to conceive the totality of social relations within a given society. Also, history reflects progress in almost every area of our lives anyway, and there should be nothing wrong with someone wanting to write about the progress that we see all around us.

One way we can observe change more accurately is to numerically represent applicable aspects of history. Cliometrics is the use of quantitative methods in historical analysis. Statistical analysis has been very helpful in demographic history and has been made easier with advances in the processing power of computers. But there are objections to cliometrics. First of all, statistics don't always reveal the full picture since there may be numerous unknown variables. Models are useful, but some variables will be omitted, especially those that can't be quantified. Cliometric models weigh heavily on quantitative data, and non-quantifiable data is often left out. One final problem with cliometrics is that inferences are sometimes made that cannot be quantified.

Regardless of its shortcomings, cliometrics is excellent for backing up factual statements with precision. It is of greater value when used with questions about *how many* and *what percentage of*, rather than with questions regarding *how*.

In contrast to quantitative theory, there are theories of meaning. This theoretical approach evolved with the increasing valuing of intellectual history. This study of the history of ideas evolved into psychohistory. Since history is sometimes seen as a "construction" of the past, discourse theory became popular by attempting to "deconstruct" some of those model constructs.

Some ideas were found to be unstable to close scrutiny, such as those of class, race and nation.

What was left was the study of how meanings were constructed. The older ideas of what we *were* as Americans was more likely to be replaced by what it *means* to be an American.

Theoretical approaches may not be ideal, but they do stimulate the discussion of hypotheses. Models may be looked at closer to see how non-quantitative variables should be accounted for. This discussion encourages close examination of all aspects of historical methodology, which in turn should help in the refinement of the discipline.

With various thematic approaches, and through theoretical methods that attempt a comprehensive approach to the study of history, we can learn to appreciate the various uses of history. There are many positive things that we can learn from history, and those things can help us to become better decision makers in the future.

Works Cited

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