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WHY HISTORY?

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Abstract

In this short but important article, the author asks the question "What is History?" and how does the study of history benefit a community at a particular time? By moving beyond a definition of history as simply "facts about the past," the essay attempts to show how interpretation and the historian themselves affect the writing of history. The essay concludes with an attempt to show the value of history in the lives of a community and how history itself helps to foster a sense of understanding and identity.

In a few places, the author appeals to the experience of the Ismaili communities as the article had been solicited by an Ismaili magazine. More generally, he quotes examples from Islamic history. But these references are illustrative rather than primary, and the aim of the article is to illuminate the significance of all history as such, and the issues of interest and concern to all historians who reflect systematically on their craft.

Keywords

History, Past, Present, Future, Facts, Interpretations, Identity.

Introduction

Of all the subjects taught in our universities, history is the least properly understood. Every month sees a spate of history text-books, volumes, and paper backs flooding the market. Yet both among intellectuals and lay people, this subject is scarcely understood in any depth. This is especially surprising since history is an ancient pursuit. Its very antiquity, however, makes it prone to neglect and misunderstanding. This inadequacy is brought out in various ways. Some people show at best a condescending tolerance for professional historians. Others worship them as men with a "fantastic memory". In this article, I propose to discuss the nature and uses of history. Thus I will try to answer two essential questions: What is history? And how does the study of history benefit a group of people at a given moment of time? My examples will be drawn primarily from Islamic history. Finally, I will make a few general remarks about why I think the study of history has a special place in our community at present.

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The Ingredients of History

First, the nature of history. What is history? The answer which we give to this question will illustrate and will depend on the value we attach to history in our own lives. This in turn will bring to light the general philosophical attitudes that govern our lives. Now most people's answer to this question will be in some such form as this: history is the study of "facts about the past". To most people this answer would come naturally and readily enough. Now let me make it clear at once that to my mind, and to many who might have given some thought to the subject, this definition is both inadequate and misleading. It contains two fallacies. These are brought out by the two terms "facts" and "past", respectively. Both conceptions are misleading, and I will deal with each of them in turn.

The Beginnings of Islam: An Example

To begin with, let us give some thought to this notion of "facts". For the kind of man whom I have in mind (whose notion of history I am criticising), historical "facts" are of the same order as those involved in saying, for instance, that such and such a man is so many years old, or Mr. So and So is the President of such and such a country, with the only difference that historical facts belong to the past and not to the present. This kind of man looks upon historical facts, as aptly put by an English historian, as "fish on a fishmonger's slab". They are all there, neatly arranged, countable, clearly visible for what they are, and ready to be picked up. Now historical facts are often much more complex, much less clear, and in many instances, far more uncertain. Moreover, it is worth noting that the more historical books you read, the more you will realise that not all historians quote the same facts. This is not necessarily because one historian knows more or less facts than another - though this may occasionally be true - but because different historians attach different significance to different facts. After all, a historian often finds himself faced with a large corpus of facts. In making a selection, for reasons of brevity if not anything else, he is compelled to discard or overlook some of the available facts. And in doing this, his interpretative bias inevitably enters into the process. A very interesting illustration of this can be found in the history of the Prophet of Islam.

As is well known, the first half of the Prophet's mission was preached in Mecca. Why did the new religion of Islam displace or overshadow the old tribal worship of idols and astral gods? This is a question that would arise in the mind of any historian seeking to understand the rise and growth of Islam. Now some historians have held that the old religions had ceased to satisfy the spiritual needs of the tribal nomads. They were desperately in search of a new religion that would give them a fresh inspiration and sense of morale, and Islam offered them just such a sense of purpose. Others have held that the rise of Islam was promoted and encouraged by the growing sense of pride in the Arabic tradition, as borne out in pre-Islamic poetry, a pride which arose as a reaction against successive raids by foreigners.

A contemporary scholar of Islam, Montgomery Watt, has emphasised yet another aspect of the situation. He has pointed out that in pre-Islamic Mecca, a new class of merchants was rising as a result of the caravan trade for which the city was a centre. This was a new class which was clearly separate from the desert nomads. Trade, however, is apt to foster individualism, and Watt believes that the Meccan merchants were developing an individualistic way of life which was in sharp contrast with traditional tribal ethics, where the



stress fell on mutual help and corporate solidarity. You can see how these different interpretations would lead to emphasis on different facts. The historian who thought that the triumph of the new religion was a consequence of the atrophy of the old forms of worship, would be apt to concentrate on evidence about pre-Islamic beliefs, and in particular, on any hints of dissatisfaction over these beliefs among the Arabs. The other historian, who might be inclined to attach importance to the growth of an Arabic consciousness as the chief ingredient in Islam, will naturally be led to stress the sense of pride exhibited in pre-Islamic poetry. He will also draw attention to the fact that there had been repeated incursions into Arabia by Romans, the Persians, and Axumites. Furthermore, he will tend to attach particular significance to independent Arab Kingdoms, such as the Nabataeans and the Palmyrenes who, he will argue, reflected a sense of independence among the Arabs long before the days of Islam, and of which Islam marked a lasting culmination. On the other hand, we find that Montgomery Watt is particularly struck by the fact that the early part of Prophet Muhammad's mission consisted of repeated references to social ethics, such as honesty in business, honouring one's word, the spirit of fellowship and brotherhood, etc. The fact that the Meccan verses in the Qur'an contain repeated references to these values is for Montgomery Watt a historical fact which serves to reinforce his thesis that it was the growth of mercantile individualism in Mecca which was an important factor in the rise of Islam. Thus, different historians select and stress different facts, not because their capacity for collecting evidence is different, but because their interpretations are different.

The Islamic Conquests: Another Example

The element of interpretation is vital in all history-writing. It is important that one should see that history consists of facts plus interpretation (and the facts, as we have seen, undergo selection in the service of differing interpretations). Let us take a well-known case illustrating the element of interpretation. In the Islamic field, one particular phenomenon which has always puzzled historians is the speed and the magnitude of the early conquests. Within a decade following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Arabs, who had hitherto been dismissed as marauding Bedouins, overran vast stretches of land previously under Byzantine and Persian rule. Swiftly they brought Palestine, Syria and Egypt under their control, and wrested from the mighty Persian (Sassanid) Empire the provinces of Iraq, and later, Khorasan. Thus they brought two powerful empires to their knees. What made this sudden and dramatic conquest possible? What was the source of the incentive for this extraordinary expansion? What facilitated an enterprise on such a grand scale?

Historians offer different answers. One interpretation rests almost exclusively on the religious element. It argues that the single most outstanding feature of the conquests was the religious drive behind it. The Qur'an urged the believers to strive to propagate the faith, and the Arabs set out to do this in obedience to the command. Other historians have argued that the conquests were more of an extension of habit. The Bedouins, they point out, often conducted raids in search of booty. The Islamic conquests, they argue, were raids carried out with the same aim in mind, but on a larger scale and under the banner of a new faith. Yet other historians have been more inclined to stress the economic and social unrest in Arabia on the eve of the conquests, which, they believe, led to a pouring out of the Muslims from the peninsula and into the lands previously occupied by the great powers. Other explanations have been somewhat more inclusive. Historians have drawn attention to the fact that the two great powers occupying the lands which were conquered by the Arabs, namely the Roman (Byzantine) empire in the West and the Persian (Sassanid) empire in the East, had been



exhausted as a result of prolonged fighting; that over-taxation and religious persecution had turned their subjects against them; and that the Arabs, galvanised by the energy of their new faith, delivered the last, lethal blow to these already prostrate giants. Thus we have significantly different interpretations for an event of vital consequence. All history is essentially an exercise in interpreting the doings of men. The element of interpretation, however, is something much more than subjective opinion. The professional historian does not form his judgements in a vacuum, nor does he base them on the dictates of mere impulse. These conclusions always involve a step by step building up of argument. The historian, like the adjudicator in a legal case, has to marshal the evidence at his disposal in order. to arrive at a judgement, and this task demands both intellectual rigour and intuitive finesse. The criterion of validity in history lies in the extent to which he can appeal to facts, and the way in which he can use them to support his thesis. Even then there is bound to be more than one interpretation, and the process of historical inquiry and decision is a never-ending one.

The Influence of the Present

This brings us next to the second assumption which I pointed out as a fallacy at the start - namely that it is the past which has the sole relevance in the study of history. It is clear that if an essential aspect of history consists of interpretation, it is bound to be influenced by the prevailing circumstances of the period in which the historian himself happens to be living. The historian is but a product of his times; his judgements are as much influenced by the social circumstances, intellectual assumptions and moral quests of his age, as are anybody else's. The prejudices, assumptions about what is important to us is not, about the relative importance of the individual and the society - and a host of such ideas - all condition and colour a historian's writing. Again, if the historian is honest and intellectually alert at his job, he will try as much as is humanly possible to eliminate any unnecessary bias that he may detect in his writing. Nevertheless, just as our perception of the present is conditioned by the legacy of our past, so is our perception of the past moulded by our experience of the present. Turning once again to Islamic history, it is interesting to consider, in some ways, the ideas of the greatest historian of Islam, Ibn Khaldun, who lived during the fourteenth century A.D. He believed that civilisation arose out of group solidarity, but that once a civilisation was so established, it was inevitably bound to decline. His was thus a cyclical conception of history. Now it is interesting to note that by Ibn Khaldun's day, the unity of the Islamic empire had already been torn apart. From the ninth century onwards, independent principalities had already begun to spring up in different parts of the empire, thus loosening the centralised authority at Baghdad. The Mongol onslaught in the thirteenth century left a gaping scar in the consciousness of the Muslims. Ibn Khaldun himself witnessed the defeat of the Mamluk Sultan, Faraj, under whom he was serving, at the hands of the Turks. It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that Ibn Khaldun's cyclical theory of history was conditioned in a large way by a memory and experience of decline and defeat, of which the Muslims of the day must have been all too aware.

Turning to European history in the modern period, the same pressing influence of the historian's age on his writing becomes apparent. Until recently, England was the central focus of English historians. At its widest, the core of the English historian's concern extended only to Europe. The rest of the world, and especially Asia and Africa, received attention only in so far as these events reflected or were relevant to events in Europe. This was a natural result of the age of imperialism. For in the period of colonial expansion, Europe was particularly susceptible to the habit of complementing herself for having acquired world supremacy, and



hence the general assumption always was that the rest of the world had no distinctive histories in their own right. As a result, English historians usually treated these countries as appendages of Europe. With the dissolution of the empire, however, interest in the history of Asia and Africa in their own right, i.e. as peoples with their own past which had a parallel sovereignty to that of Europe, began to grow. Hence, nowadays, we find an increasing number of historians whose world history, if they are honest, refuses to be subservient to the outlook prevalent during the days of the empire. And a serious interest in the history of non-European peoples in their own right seems to be growing.

Images of the Future

These are but two examples demonstrating how history-writing is firmly anchored to the prevailing circumstances of the age. Any piece of historical writing, therefore, tells us as much about the period of the historian, as it does about the period which forms the subject of the writing. But this is not all. Most human beings have aspirations which they project, and which they hope to realise, in the future. A vision of the future seems to be an essential quality of the human imagination, and historians, no less than others, have their own ideas as to what the future ought to be like. Their notions of what "ought" to be the case, and what "might" be the case, determine their conception of what is the case. Thus experience of the present is subtly influenced by expectations regarding the future. Ibn Khaldun was probably led into thinking that group solidarity provided the impetus to the growth of civilisations by his encounter with Timur Lang, who came as a conqueror, heading a tribe well-known for their organisation and solidarity. Past, present, and future are fluid categories of time, and no other human pursuit brings this out as clearly as does the writing of history.

The Uses of History

We must now turn to the second question we raised at the beginning of this article, viz. the value of studying history. What is the use of studying history for a society or nation? Is it a mere intellectual exercise for those who have nothing else to do? Is it, in other words, an intellectual luxury, or does it bring benefit to the scholar and the reader?

I have tried to show above that the study of history demands a severe intellectual discipline in its own right. This in itself is one of its values. Like the other humanities, it deepens the imagination, and like the other sciences, it sharpens the intellect. More specifically, history also serves, in a broad way, as a guide to our actions now and in the future. By observing how men in the past harnessed the resources of their environment, and the energies in their soul in order to master challenges and create civilisations, we can obtain useful clues in coming to grips with present problems and realizing a vision for the future.

A vital mode in which history serves a function is derived from the fact that the present can never be understood in isolation from the past. This fact is more easily demonstrable in the case of the individual personality. You can hardly ever imagine a person as severed from the past. At any given moment in an individual's life, his attitudes, his values and his opinions form a long chain of experiences and influences throughout his life. We are all in the process of "becoming" all the time, and, in this process, each phase in our life has repercussions on the next. Thus, each individual personality has his past, so to speak, "encapsulated" in him. This is also true of groups of people. A community or nation is the product of forces that



brought it into being in the first place, and shaped it through its career. To help us understand how the religions, the institutions, and the nations in which we find ourselves came to be what they are is one of the prime functions of history.

Transcending the Present

By extending one's consciousness in time, a sense of history heightens one's capacity for transcendence over the immediate present. To feel the past alive in one's bones, to rise above the frustrations and ephemeral currents of the present, is an exalting experience. A vivid sense of tradition, of the ever-flowing stream of history in which men like those of one's own time have struggled and striven to capture a sense of meaning and purpose is essential if one's consciousness is to expand beyond the limited point of the present. History fosters a partnership with the dead, and the dead come to life through history. It also serves as a therapy for undue obsession with the present, and this may help to liberate one from being bound excessively by time. In Ismailism, the fact that the Imam embodies a tradition extending considerably backwards in time creates the setting for just such an experience. By encapsulating the past within himself, the Imam serves as history incarnate, so to speak. In this sense, history is not only "learned"; it is also "experienced", with a heightening of one's intellectual and moral imagination.

History and Identity

Finally, history has a unique role to fulfil in promoting and fortifying a sense of identity. For an individual to have a recognizable personality, the latter should be "continuous". One's personality may change, but it should change within certain boundaries which are constant. Memory, for one thing, is integral to the human personality. An individual who experiences an abrupt rupture with the past suffers a break-down. In the same way, a society usually maintains its past within itself as a necessary core of continuous survival. Changes and modifications assume their significance only in relation to continuity. For this reason, a sense of continuity is important, and history is a self-conscious articulation of this sense. The element of persistence through time becomes especially important in moments of transition. In periods of rapid or fundamental change, the search for the past is a vital spiritual necessity. It lends to the people involved in the change a sense of identity which can enable them to maintain some stability in the midst of flux. The Ismaili communities in East Africa have been going through a period of momentous change. The dissolution of colonial rule, and the dawning of independence, has created needs for fundamental adaptation on the part of ethnic and religious groups, such as the Ismailis. If this challenge is to be met, if what we usually term "integration" is to be achieved, a sense of our own identity is supremely important. This may sound self-contradictory on the face of it. Must we not, in order to integrate, cease to be ourselves? My answer would be that this is never possible. Creative interaction demands that the parties concerned realise their own identities to the full. People who are in love with each other, or exhibit co-operation in one form or another are yet, each of them, individuals in their own right. For a community or group to enter into a creative partnership with another community or nation, it is essential that it shall realise its identity to the full. By acquiring a vital self-image through assimilation of one's historical past, energies for future adjustments and modifications are set free. For the Ismailis, the need for such a liberating and creative experience has never been so intense as it is today. Towards the satisfaction of such a need, history has an invaluable role to fulfil.