



PRINCIPLES OF OBJECTIVITY IN HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

¹Ibrahim Musa Alhassan, ²Amina Bello Usman and ³Chuba Doumaru

¹Department of History & International Studies, Zamfara State University, Talata Mafara, Nigeria

²Department of History & International Studies, Zamfara State University, Talata Mafara, Nigeria

³Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Administration), Federal University Gusau, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study focuses on the role of objectivity and its principle is the foundation on which the structure of historical profession stands. Most, if not all, historians wrote in the belief that their writings presented an objective picture of the world. Even when they disagreed among themselves, they believed that their accounts were more objective than those of others whom they criticized. Thus, the historical battles were fought on the grounds of objectivity. There are also debates among historians about whether they expect descriptions of past people and events, interpretations of historical subjects, and genetic explanations of historical changes to be fair and not misleading.

Sometimes unfair accounts of the past are the result of historian's bias of their preferring one account over others because it aligns with their interests. Bias is visible everywhere in history. When some historians concentrate their attention more on interpretation and analysis, giving importance to the evidence, partiality is clearly visible in their writing. Thus, to avoid bias, historical objectivity is an easy solution, although it is very difficult to adhere to the concept of objectivity in historical writing. To achieve the objectives of this study, historical research techniques are used. But to be specific, the study adopted the historical method for data collection. The data used to construct this study are from category of secondary sources. These sources are mainly published and unpublished works such as books, article in journals and seminar/workshop papers as well as internet sources. The assessment of the sources recovered involved corroboration and collaboration of the available data for the subject.

Keywords: Role, Principles, Objectivity, History, Historiography.

Introduction

Objectivity has been the founding principle of the historiographical studies around the globe. Since the days of Herodotus, historians have believed in the separation of the subject and the object, in the distinction between the knower and the known, and in the possibility of recovering the past. The principles of objectivity have been clearly defined as the principal elements of the ideal of objectivity are well known and can be briefly recapitulated. The assumptions on which it rests include a commitment to the reality of the past and to the truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value; and above

all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation: the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned. Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are ‘found not ‘made’.

However, the historians have to be impartial, independent, and objective and should not take sides. They should be able to suspend their personal beliefs and rely only on the truth of the evidence. The role of an objective historian is that of a neutral or disinterested judge; it must never degenerate into that of an advocate, supporter, or, even worse, propagandist. The historian’s conclusions are expected to display the standard judicial qualities of balance, fairness, and justice. As with the judiciary, these qualities are guarded by the insulation of the historical profession from social pressures or political influence and by the individual historian avoiding partisanship or bias and not having any investment in arriving at one conclusion rather than another.¹ Objectivity is held to be at grave risk when history is written for utilitarian purposes. One consequence of all this is that historians, as historians, must purge themselves of external loyalties: the historian’s primary allegiance is to the objective historical truth and to professional colleagues who share a commitment to cooperative, cumulative efforts to advance towards that goal. Therefore, objectivity is the founding principle of the historical profession; it must maintain distance from propaganda and wishful thinking and also rely on evidence, logic, and reason.

After collection of documents and retrieval of factual sources from the field, library, archive, and other relevant areas, the next operation of the historian is the interpretation of the facts. Then the final work of a historian begins, which is an explanation of the theme or subject matter and their skillful presentation. In this task, the aspect noticed is the problem of objectivity, which means the use of historical facts without bias, partiality, or subjectivity. The principle of objectivity is the foundation on which the structure of the historical profession stands. Most, if not all, historians wrote in the belief that their writings presented an objective picture of the world. Even when they disagreed among themselves, they believed that their accounts were more objective than those of others whom they criticized. Thus, the historical battles were fought on the grounds of objectivity. There are also debates among historians about whether they expect descriptions of past people and events, interpretations of historical subjects and genetic explanations of historical changes to be fair and not misleading. Sometimes unfair accounts of the past are the result of historian’s bias in preferring one account over others because it accords with their interests.²

It is useful to distinguish history that is misleading by accident from that which is the result of personal bias, and to distinguish personal bias from cultural bias and general cultural relativity. Hence, to understand the concept of historical objectivity, one of the major characteristics of research is objectivity. In an ideal situation, research is beyond the subjective bias of the researcher. As a researcher, you have to make deliberate efforts to eliminate all personal preferences. You should resist the temptation to seek only such data that supports your hypotheses or your line of teaching. In scientific research, the emphasis is on testing the hypothesis, not proving it. You have to willingly suspend your personal judgement in order to allow the data and logic to lead independently to a sound conclusion.⁵ If you want to achieve objectivity in your investigation, you have to use standardised research instruments, choose appropriate research design and analytical tools, and also ensure the dependability of the data.

¹ F. A. Van Jaarsveld, *On OBJECTIVITY, SUBJECTIVITY and RELATIVITY in the Writing of History*, ... 1999. P.10

² F. A. Van Jaarsveld, *On OBJECTIVITY, SUBJECTIVITY and RELATIVITY in the Writing of History*, ... 1999. P.11. ⁵ P. P. Leedy, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, (6th edition.) New Jersey. Morrill, 1997. Pp.17-18.

A Critical View of Objectivity

In spite of the complicated nature of historical objectivity, historians have presented some solutions to these problems. It is true that historical descriptions are neither acceptable to all nor belong to all times, but they are influenced by the facts. The impact of the personality of the scholar is clearly visible in his works. It is not impossible for a historian to put aside his personal bias from his composition so as to come out of his own skin. Actually, objectivity means mutual understanding, not a conflicting and contrasting attitude. There appears to be no difference of opinion in the knowledge of objectivity; the thing changes itself.³ Objectivity knowledge is far from the influence of place and period. However, scientific objectivity and historical objectivity are poles apart. A prominent historian does not present the twisted facts. His personal interest or isolation, partial attitude, and different principles also clearly point out how the attitude of the historian remains attached to objectivity. It is also necessary for an intellectual historian to follow the canon of history writing. In fact, history loses its real nature in the absence of intellectual faith and becomes a novel or an imaginative composition. The principle of history always inspires a historian to be objective.⁴

There are all sorts of reasons for rejecting the possibility of objective knowledge of the past. But one reason has become particularly prominent in the latter half of the 20th century. In general terms, the argument is that we cannot have objective historical knowledge because we do not have access to a given past against which to judge rival interpretations. Hermeneutic theorists sometimes make this point by stressing the historicity of our understanding. We cannot have access to a given past because any understanding we develop of the past will necessarily be infused by prejudices arising from our particular historical situation. We cannot have access to a given past because the past is constructed by discourses, which are themselves the effects of power. Finally, deconstructionists make much the same point by arguing that nothing can be straightforwardly presented as a given truth. We cannot have access to a given past because the objects of the past, like all other objects, do not have stable meanings or identities. All these are instances of rejecting historical objectivity on the grounds that we do not have access to a given past against which to judge rival interpretations. They reject the possibility of accessing a given past for rather different reasons: the historicity of our being, the influence of power on discourse, and the absence of any stable meanings, but they all agree that we cannot grasp the past as a presence and that this threatens the very possibility of objective historical knowledge.⁵

Development of the Principles of Objectivity

The belief that there is a reality of the past and that it is possible to historically capture it has been engrained in the dominant tradition of historiography. Since the time of Herodotus, the western world of historiography has maintained historical records referring to a real past and real human beings.⁹ The objectivist tradition believed in both the reality of the past as well as the possibility of its mirror representation. It upholds that there was a correspondence between the intentions and actions of the people, and the historians should exert themselves to comprehend the mental world of the people in the past.⁶ The development of modern science has added a new dimension to this belief. It was now asserted that the methods used in the sciences could be applicable to various branches of human knowledge. According to positivists, all societies have historically passed through three stages

³ E. Matruggio, "Objectivity and Critique: The Creation of Historical Perspectives in Senior Secondary Writing", *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, Volume 39, Number 2, 2016. P.124.

⁴ P. O. Oyewale, "Objectivity: A Subject of Discourse in Historical Writing", *AFRREV International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)*, Volume 3 Number 1, 2014

⁵ E. Matruggio, "Objectivity and Critique: The Creation of Historical Perspectives in Senior Secondary Writing". 2016. ⁹ K. Anbalakan, "Objectivity in History: An Analysis", *Journal of KEMANUSIAAN*, Volume 23, Number 1, 2016. P.24.

⁶ K. Anbalakan, "Objectivity in History: An Analysis". P.25.

of development. These stages were: first, the 'theological' or fictitious stage, during which the human mind was in its infancy and the natural phenomena were explained as the results of divine or supernatural powers. Secondly, the 'metaphysical' or abstract stage is transitional in the course of which the human mind passes through adolescence. In this stage, the processes of nature were explained as arising from occult powers. Finally, the 'positive' stage witnessed the maturity of the human mind and the perfection of human knowledge. Now there was no longer a search for the causes of the natural phenomena but a quest for the discovery of their laws. Observation, reasoning, and experimentation were the means to achieve this knowledge. This was the scientific age, which is the final stage in the development of human societies as well as human minds.⁷

Historians clearly distinguished history from literature and philosophy. By doing so, they attempted to free it from an overdose of imagination and metaphysical speculation. For them, the historian's job was to investigate the past on its own terms and to show the readers how it essentially was. They, in fact, wanted the historians to subject the sources to strict examination and look for their internal consistency so as to determine whether they were genuine or later additions. They also wanted the historians to critically examine and verify all the sources before putting their trust in them. But, once it was proved that the records were genuine and belonged to the age in which the historian was studying, the historian may put complete faith in them. He called these records 'primary sources' and maintained that these sources would provide the foundations for a true representation of the contemporary period.⁸ Thus, historians should trust the archival records more than the printed ones, which might be biased. They, however, believed that it was possible to reconstruct the past and that objectivity was attainable.

This trend emphasises that the facts were in the records, which the historians needed to discover. If the historians were unbiased, followed a proper scientific method, and removed their personalities from the process of investigation, it would be possible to reconstruct the past from these facts. There was an enormous belief in the facts in the 19th and early decades of the 20th centuries.⁹ It was thought that once all the facts were known, it was possible to write 'ultimate history; the writing of history was simply related to the documents, which could not be superseded or outdated. The scientific status of history was forcefully assessed by Bury at Cambridge. He believed that although history may supply material for fictitious art or philosophical speculation and assumption, she is herself simply a science, no less and no more'. The writing of history was simply related to the documents. It did not matter who the historian was, as long as verified documents for the period were available. In this view, as E.H. Carr put it, 'History consists of a body of discovered facts. The facts are available to historians in documents, inscriptions and so on. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him'.¹⁰

But even before the 19th century ended, such beliefs started to look fantastic. Application of some new techniques in archaeology and other areas uncovered ever-increasing information, even about most ancient societies. Moreover, in the beginning of the 20th century, historiography moved in other directions away from political history which the 19th-century historians specialised in. Social, economic and cultural histories began to be written.¹¹ The historians started to look at already available documents from new perspectives and for different

⁷ K. Anbalakan, "Objectivity in History: An Analysis". P.29.

⁸ M. Arockiasamy Xavier SJ, "Objectivity in Historical Writings", A Paper Presented at Department of History, St. Joseph's College, Autonomous, 2002.

⁹ G.G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, Wesleyan University Press, London, 1997. P.72.

¹⁰ M.D. Neyaz-Hussain, "Objectivity and Subjectivity in History", A Paper Presented at PG Department of History, Maharaja College, VKSU, ARA (Bihar), 2019. P.3.

¹¹ G.G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*,

purposes. It was also pointed out that the works of historians who believed in complete objectivity and acknowledged the use of 'primary sources' were full of rhetorical elements and were many times based on printed secondary sources'. They considered two fundamental themes and believed that history could be written scientifically and objectively and that there was a direction in which history was moving continuously.¹²

Need for Objectivity in Historical Writings

In the present age, great attention is being paid to the need for historical objectivity, so that a scientific outlook has developed towards the study of history. To think of the study of the scientific nature of history as a useless effort in the absence of objectivity. The following fundamental principles need special attention in this connection:

- What type of objectivity is expected from a historian?
- Is it necessary to think of objectivity and subjectivity in history?
- Why do scholars and historians see history as a problem of objectivity?
- Is it a fact that history can never be objective like science?

In order to get the proper answer to the questions, it is necessary to think of them according to the following points:

Objectivity is the expression of history. Personality is given less importance in comparison to facts in history. In fact, we can say objectivity by giving supremacy to fact. The meaning of intellectual objectivity is to separate personal elements from history. Historical objectivity can be established more by practice than by principles. In fact, the description of a of a real fact is objectivity. Those historians are liable for criticism if they present the facts from their own perspective, hide them, or give importance to personal feelings. There is the possibility of objectivity in history without paying attention to place or person. A historian, leaving aside objectivity, should not describe anything according to personal interest.¹³

Man is motivated by religion, but a historian must keep himself far from religious influence. A historian is required to produce a true account of society without being involved with one or another sect. He would be able to save objectivity by doing so. The nature of history can be very simple if a historian follows the methods of an artist. He should describe historical thinking like an artist. This is the principle of nature that he also provides solutions to problems. A historian describes the past according to his own perspective and belief that real objectivity must always be available in his description, so on the basis of the above-reoffered need for historical objectivity, it could be maintained.¹⁴

Problems of Objectivity Historical in the Historical Writings

Problems of historical objectivity are very complicated and only after the solution of these problems by the supporters of scientific theory is there a possibility of establishing the principle of historical objectivity. Lack of impartiality: Nothing itself can be objective. On the other hand, objectivity is established. Modern scholars intend to make history objective through external methods, on account of which the question of objectivity has become a debatable issue among scholars. A modern historian, in order to establish his view, describes the past with a specific attitude, concept, personal jealousy, bias, or misunderstanding, which can never be neutral. Thus, an incomplete description of events is a great problem in establishing objectivity. Influence of Social Environment: Karl Marx has considered man to be a social being involved in traditions. As history is also born and developed in the context of society and religion, it is equally influenced by them. Even a historian is not free from this

... 1979. P.73.

¹² P.D. Jordan, *The Nature and Practice of State and Local History*, American Historical Association, Washington, D.C., 1958. P.122.

¹³ B. Mark, "Objectivity in History", *History and Theory*, Volume 33, Number 3, Blackwell Publishing for Wesleyan University, 1994.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505477?origin=JSTOR-pdf>

¹⁴ B. Mark, "Objectivity in History", *History and Theory*, Volume 33, Number 3. ... 1994.

impact; therefore, according to Karl Marx, there is a lot of disharmony in the writings of Arab, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Russian and American historians. Hence, supporters of the scientific concept of history would endeavour to find objectivity outside of society.¹⁵

Changeability of History: undoubtedly, history is the study of past events that have been presented by historians of different ages according to their own viewpoints. Historians of each society write history according to the needs of their society. However, change in Belief: many beliefs of the past now and in the same way, the historic authenticity of the present would also become meaningless in the future, but there appears to be no change in objectivity with the passage of time. For example, two and two make four, which is certain according to mathematics. Hence, objectivity is always sovereign at all ages.¹⁶ **Need of Ages:** The historian presents the collected data and facts according to the needs of his age and circumstances. In history writing, contemporary social needs are given preference. Prominent scholars Croce has also pointed out that history is written in accordance with the age, and he feels that the soul of man should be conscious of his epoch; only then can he draw a real picture of society. The utility of one historical fact changes from time to time in different ages, as the selfish nature of man also goes on changing according to time, age and circumstances. As the history of one epoch differs from the other, it is not possible to prove historical objectivity at all.

Influence of Personal Feelings: In the selection of historical facts, the attitude of man is generally influenced by his personal emotions, social environment and economic circumstances. In such a condition, it is natural that he is led astray from the principle of historicity. Hence, it is not proper to expect objectivity from him in these conditions. Most of the works of historians are inspired by personal feelings, on account of which historical facts are often neglected and the effort of objectivity is marred at all.¹⁷ **Feeling of Bias:** There is no reason to deny the fact that historians generally become victims of bias. Generally, in history, we study the past. So the presence of bias and sympathy is certain in history. The description based on the interests of the writer can be subjective but not objective. **Selective Nature of History:** The nature of history is selective. As it is not possible for history to show the complete picture of the past, he draws his attention to one aspect of history. Being involved in the bias and partiality, historians described the events in their own fashion. It is therefore, evident that a historian selects facts in support of his views. Such a tendency is a great stumbling block in the way of historical objectivity.¹⁸

Supremacy of Emotions: There is supremacy of emotion in history writing instead of logic. History writing is the subject of consciousness. Hence, the supremacy of motion is inherent in it. The personality of the historian is clearly visible in his work, from which it is not possible to remove the supremacy of emotion and make it objective. Historical objectivity is a complicated problem. Inspired by all possible impartiality, the historian cannot be objective because the writer himself describes the events connected with the man, who is made of the same flesh and bone as the writer himself. **Problem of Religion and Caste:** Another problem of objectivity is connected with religion and caste. It is almost impossible for a historian to get free of these feelings because of the influence of religion and caste. The mediaeval historians endeavoured to present their accounts of historical facts in their own fashion.¹⁹

The entire nature of history cannot be made objective except for the economic aspect. Social changes keep changing. There is no possibility that the thing that is not important in the present contrast might not have been

¹⁵ T.M. Manjunatha, "The Problem of Historical Objectivity". 2015.

¹⁶ P.D. Jordan, *The Nature and Practice of State and Local History*, ... 1958. P.124.

¹⁷ G.G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, ... 1979. P.73.

¹⁸ T.M. Manjunatha, "The Problem of Historical Objectivity". 2015.

¹⁹ P.D. Jordan, *The Nature and Practice of State and Local History*, ... 1958. P.124.

significant in the past either. Man cannot get free of himself from the influence of changing values. The man of civilised society has intimate relationships with different political parties and a historian, being a social creature is also influenced by the ideologies of the political parties and presents his interpretation of history according to his own view.²⁰

Conclusion

The above discussion informs us that the principles of objectivity is the foundation on which the structure of historical profession stands. Most, if not all, historians wrote in the belief that their writings presented an objective picture of the world. Even when they disagreed among themselves, they believed that their accounts were more objective than those of others whom they criticized. Thus the historical battles were fought on the grounds of objectivity. There is also debates among historians show that they expect descriptions of past people and events, interpretations of historical subjects and genetic explanations of historical changes to be fair and not misleading. Sometimes unfair accounts of the past are the result of historian's bias, of their preferring one account over others because it agreements with their interests. Bias is visible everywhere in history. When some historians concentrate their attention, more to interpretation and analyses of giving importance to the evidence, partiality is clearly visible in his writing. Thus, to avoid bias historical objectivity is an easy solution although it is very difficult to adhere to the concept of objectivity in historical writing.

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²⁰ E. Matruglio, "Objectivity and Critique: The Creation of Historical Perspectives in Senior Secondary Writing", ... 2016. P.127.

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