

5. “The historian’s task is to understand the past; the human scientist, by contrast, is looking to change the future.” To what extent is this true in these areas of knowledge?

George Novak’s ‘Human Nature Theory’ suggests that a historian’s task is to identify certain attributes that humans hold, then go deeper into accounting for these traits by exploring the progression of history ("Major Theories Of History From The Greeks To Marxism"), and eventually come up with a new model for society based on any existing flaws or weaknesses. This school of thought leans towards the idea that historians are responsible for not only the discovery of past occurrences, but to also take up the role of further deciphering the problems and analyzing methods to change social structure. However, that being the case is it possible that historians and by extension history itself, have encroached onto the territory of the human sciences? This might suggest that there is no place for the human scientist, since the historian is effectively able to carry out the former’s role. In that case, is it necessary for each of the two to have restricted roles, or is it possible that both work in tandem in creating an ideal community?

The surface level consensus exists when deciding what history is based about – the past. Although different aspects may be prioritized (who, what, why, social, economic or political), the task of the historian remains dedicated to the precedent.

There are a variety of claims that can be made, when deciding what a historian does. The range of equitable positions one can hold with regard to this decision is quite high, because different historians specialize in different areas of history, and may choose to go about their job in various manners. Not all historians are forced to look at the same aspects of events of the past; they may focus on 'why the event occurred', 'what happened after the event', or even 'who started the event'.

With so many standpoints to take on the subject, the assertion can thus be formulated that with history being written by thousands of historians, there may well not be one central, fixed, set task to abide by. Different historians have the capacity to look into different areas of the past, and then branch out further by analyzing any of the several related features. In essence, it is not mandatory, or likely, for the countless number of historians to study the same aspect of history.

It can also be argued, that a historian has the ability go beyond the restriction of 'understanding the past' and move on to analyzing past trends, and then looking to change the future. By predicting trends over a certain period of time, it is likely that historians acquire the necessary skills to predict what the future may hold for us. Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* is one such example, where a historian was able to accurately predict the future. The novel, written in 1955 by a leading orthodox historian on Vietnam, speculated about the actions of the USA to come, 20 odd years later. Greene suspected that after the initial burst of foreign intervention, America would grow weary of

their involvement and sustained depletion of resources, eventually leading to a withdrawal and forcing the South Vietnamese to fend for themselves. In 1973, the US pulled out their last troops from Vietnam ("Vietnam War Timeline"), only to leave South Vietnam to face a massive, now unprotected assault from the North two years later. To date, this is one of the finest examples of where a historian was able to accurately predict the future - by looking at trends in American foreign relations and the actions of the military in previous conflicts, historians such as Greene were able to assess, through a work of fiction, how the Vietnam War might conclude. While it might be fair to counter that such instances of spot-on predictions are rare, the very existence of them in the field of history suggests that the historians sole task is not all about the past - some may use their vast experience and knowledge on a certain topic to analyze, and therefore predict, future actions of countries, governments, or individuals.

In this case, the historian's work was represented through the medium of art – literature - and not a historical text. Far from a problem, the portrayal of history through art can very well be seen as advantageous, where the idea that history is made up of judgments, views and opinions held can be put forward. Be it through speeches, broadcasts or telecasts at the time of the event, or novels and cartoons published after, a significant emphasis can be placed on the various forms of art that emerge, all depicting historical events from different perspectives. Greene's novel and the opinions put forward act as a value, rather than setback when exploring history.

The opposing belief also exists that historians will never be able to do anything apart from analyzing and studying the past, because of the 'unknown variable', or in other words - man. Barbara Tuchman, a historian herself, fielded the view that history, being "the record of human behaviour", meant that it was impossible to predict the future ("Practicing History"). Essentially, this stemmed from the belief that an individual's environment would always be so different, that it was unfeasible to come up with a model that was able to predict the actions of individuals. Factors such as where the individual grew up, with whom he socialized, his family, friends, education and jobs, among others, all contributed to the uncertainty of man as the unknown variable. A multitude of economic to social factors were all intrinsically linked to the manner in which the individual behave, which made predicting a model for historians so difficult. According to Tuchman, this would all also combine with further factors such as the "country, climate, time and historical circumstance", which makes it even easier to understand why historians would have a variety of difficulties in coming up with a specific model that could act as a guide to the future.

The variety of subjects within 'human sciences' allows a markedly different interpretation of this area of knowledge - in this sector, not only do we study how things work and the methods through which results are obtained, but we also study different ways we can make certain things work better, in the future. For example, development studies and human geography allows us to understand population movement – which in turn allows us to comprehend how trends in past population growth can model a 'system', where we can

‘make certain things better’. In this case, understanding of human geography would allow us to develop a prediction as to how populations can move and grow. Let’s break this down a little more. If the study of human geography revolves around firstly understanding the core of the subject – things like population breakdowns or spread of different parts of a population – and then analyzing the past trends present to predict a pattern, is it not logical to claim that human scientist and historian would work in tandem? Rather than forcing the term of ‘by contrast’ implying a necessary polar opposite, it could be more useful and practical to claim that a human scientist can only fulfill his job with knowledge from the historian; we can only ‘*change the future*’ once we obtain ‘*understand the past*’.

This creates a situation where the work of the historian and human scientist becomes interdependent – the affiliation between the two means that certain facts and theories that were discovered prior, can be augmented, building up to a situation where the future is influenced. Although a variety of examples of history and human sciences coexisting can be found in the medical field, a more specific example comes in the form of the black plague, rampant in the 14th century. The disease, which caused thousands of deaths every day in middle – age England, was fatal – at the time, there seemed to be no cure (“Black Death”). However, over time, as the disease spread to other parts of the world, historians of the current time looked back at the origins of the disease – they began to examine the primary source, what spread the disease, what was common within those who had been infected. Eventually, they were able to come up with findings that proved the disease was spread

by rats and fleas alike, and was dispersed through sewage systems, water supply, or a general hygiene system ("How the Black Death came to an end"). Historians had just completed the step of 'understanding the past', and would now pass on their findings to those under the field on "human sciences" – this meant that biologists, sociologists and those probing development studies would be able to interpret the data found, and come up with whatever reasonable solutions to eradicate the problem. The human scientists were able to treat the issue from its source once the theory regarding the spread of the plague was formulated by historians – targeting improved hygiene, more effective waste disposal and blocking of certain water supply paths. Although these steps took a while to eradicate the disease, the findings of the historians and the subsequent actions of the human scientists allowed a significant decline in the death rate. In rather simplistic terms, understanding the past was crucial in order to change the future.

In conclusion, it would be fair to bring back the original 'human nature theory', slightly tweak the semantics of it, and then formulate a more appropriate, relevant theory. While it is apparent and relatively obvious that both historians and human scientists are designed by definition for their respective jobs – understanding the past and changing the future – it is more pragmatic for them to work with one another. The interdependence that they have makes for more fruitful conclusions, where the historians participation side by side with the human scientist allows a variety of situations to be alleviated and greatly enhanced.

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