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Source: *History and Theory*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Feb., 2000), pp. 39-66

Published by: [Blackwell Publishing for Wesleyan University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2677997>

Accessed: 27/04/2011 07:31

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# BIAS IN HISTORICAL DESCRIPTION, INTERPRETATION, AND EXPLANATION

C. BEHAN MCCULLAGH

## ABSTRACT

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 historians' bias, of their preferring one account over others because it accords with their interests. 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.

This article explains what fair descriptions, interpretations, and explanations are like in order to clarify the senses in which they can be biased. It then explains why bias is deplorable, and after noting those who regard it as more or less inevitable, considers how personal bias can be avoided. It argues that it is not detachment that is needed, but commitment to standards of rational inquiry.

Some might think that rational standards of inquiry will not be enough to avoid bias if the evidence available to the historian is itself biased. In fact historians often allow for bias in evidence, and even explain it when reconstructing what happened in the past.

The article concludes by noting that although personal bias can be largely avoided, cultural bias is not so easy to detect or correct.

In recent years, writers such as Hayden White and F. R. Ankersmit have explored the literary and subjective sources of historical interpretation, giving the impression that although historians can infer particular facts about the past from the evidence available to them, the way they give meaning to those facts by presenting relations between them is a function of their own creative imagination constrained by no particular cognitive requirements whatever. The suggestion that historical descriptions, interpretations, and explanations could be biased would strike them as either self-evident or nonsense. It is self-evident to them that historians' accounts of the past reflect their personal interests and vision of past events; and they would think it nonsense to suppose that there is some objective standard of interpretation against which some accounts could be judged biased and others not.

When one studies instances of historical writing, however, and the scholarly discussion of such accounts, one discovers that there are indeed standards which they are expected to meet, and that accounts which clearly fail to meet them are uniformly discarded. There is a sense in which descriptions of historical subjects, general interpretations of the past, and historical explanations are expected to be

fair and not misleading. Descriptions, interpretations, and explanations that are not fair are often judged to be biased, and it is this fact that will be explored in this article. Historical descriptions, interpretations, and explanations are often presented in the form of narratives, but by focusing upon the literary and subjective sources of historical narratives, White and Ankersmit have paid little attention to their cognitive functions. Some narratives enable us to understand the past much better than others.

There are four common ways in which historical writing can be biased. First, historians sometimes misinterpret evidence, so that they are not justified in asserting that the inferences they draw about what happened in the past are true. For example, they might attend to evidence that suggests that a certain event occurred, but ignore evidence that shows it to have been impossible. Second, when historians compile an account of a historical subject, be it a person, an institution, or an event, what they say about it might be justified and credible but the account might omit significant facts about the subject so that it is unbalanced, or what I call *unfair*. For instance it might elaborate upon people's virtues but ignore their vices, giving an unfair impression of their character. The third kind of bias is that of a general description of the past that implies facts which, on the evidence available, are known to be false. Thus a Marxist might describe a revolution as a class struggle when there were no classes involved in it at all. A fourth common form of bias in history occurs in providing causal explanations of historical events when some but not all of the important causes are mentioned, so that the reader gets a misleading impression of the process by which the event came about.

These failures in historical inference, in historical description and interpretation, and in historical explanation can all occur accidentally, by mistake, through an oversight. In that case we would not call them biased but just wrong or unjustified. They are only *biased* if they occur because the historian wants the outcome she has produced, normally to further certain interests that she has. Suppose she is writing a biography of her father or of her esteemed employer. She might draw unjustified favorable inferences about his motives, and present a one-sided favorable account of his character, because she wants people to think well of him and wants herself to enjoy his popularity through her association with him. Mistakes in biased history are motivated, not accidental.

The motivation can work less directly than in the examples just given. The social group to which a historian belongs can cause a historian to prefer one general theory of human nature to another: liberals think people are normally motivated by reason and principle; Marxists think they are normally motivated, often unconsciously, by socioeconomic self-interest. The inferences they draw about people's motives for action will vary accordingly. Then again, the way a historian conceives of character can be motivated too. Liberals will think a person's avowed goals and principles are important ingredients in their character; but a Marxist will prefer to look at the dispositions which seem to inform a person's actual behavior, expecting to find self-interest trumping principle.

The kind of biased history I have been describing is attributable to class and personal bias, a desire to reach an outcome of a certain kind which influences historians when they draw inferences from data, or design accounts of historical subjects, or construct historical explanations, so as to make them unfair, given the data available. There is another kind of bias that must be distinguished from personal bias to avoid confusion. This is cultural bias, in which a historical inference, description, or explanation is later found to be untrue or unfair, relative to the evidence available, because of a culture-wide interest in information of one kind rather than another. Several cultural biases in historical writing have been detected and corrected. For instance, history was once written by intelligent white males who assumed that only intelligent white males made history. Indeed they assumed that the only history worth recording was produced by leaders, and that the role of others such as employees, servants, wives, and mothers was insignificant. This bias has been largely overcome.

It would be wrong to call history “biased” which was later found to be mistaken thanks to mistaken presuppositions upon which it was based, if the mistake in those presuppositions was not motivated by people’s interests in the first place. Such history can certainly be judged culturally relative and unjustified, but not biased. However, some culture-wide presuppositions can be shown to reflect the interests of scholars, for example, that only white males are important agents of historical change, and in that case the mistaken presuppositions must be judged biased as well as mistaken. Cultural bias can be motivated by interests, but unlike personal bias it is not easily corrected. Indeed we are much more likely to blame people whose bias is personal for not thinking fairly, than those whose bias is cultural, as the latter is often difficult for those who practice it to detect.

Some philosophers would argue that even personal bias is unavoidable. They note that historians cannot just set aside their interests and become entirely impartial. Indeed they would challenge the very idea of an impartial inference or account of the past. My first challenge is to defend the intelligibility of history free from personal bias. Having done that, I want to argue in Section Two that such bias does matter and should be eliminated if possible. In Section Three I note several pessimistic responses to what is assumed to be the inevitably subjective nature of historical accounts, responses that are not warranted if the fairness of historical accounts can be established. That raises the question of whether personal bias can indeed be avoided. In Section Four I shall argue that although complete detachment is a pipedream, historians can put commitment to rational standards of historical inquiry ahead of a desire for a certain outcome, thereby significantly reducing the bias of their accounts.

In Section Five I shall face the objection that even if historians are fair-minded, the data available to them are themselves often biased, resulting in inevitably biased history. I shall show that historians cope with this kind of bias quite successfully. The only source of bias that historians cannot readily set aside is cultural bias, as I shall explain in Section Six. There remains the possibility of residual personal bias despite commitment to fairness, but this is normally detected by

colleagues, and then readily corrected. So personal bias, I argue, can be very largely eliminated from history.

I have discussed the interpretation of historical evidence and the truth of history at length elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> so here I will focus mainly upon bias in historical descriptions, interpretations, and explanations.

#### I. THE CONCEPT OF BIAS IN HISTORICAL DESCRIPTION, INTERPRETATION, AND EXPLANATION

When historians describe something, such as a person, a society, or an event, they usually describe just certain aspects of those things, such as the character of the person, the politically active groups in the society, and the major changes that occurred in something during the event, such as the changes in an economy during a period of inflation. The aspects of a subject that they choose to examine and describe are those that interest them. To be *fair*, a description must describe all the predominant features of the chosen aspect of the subject, so that the description is not at all misleading. For example, it would be misleading to mention only the good features of a person's character and not the bad; only the dominant political group in a political structure and not the opposition groups; or only the beneficial changes that occurred during an event and not the suffering it produced.

One way to ensure that all predominant features of the chosen aspect of a subject are included is to provide an exhaustive description of it. But such a description would include trivial facts, which would be very boring. A quite brief summary description of things can be fair. Anything less than an exhaustive description, however, will be the result of selection. It is this fact that leads many people to doubt both the intelligibility and possibility of a fair description. Any description, they say, will reflect both the historian's preconceptions of the nature of the aspect of the subject being described, and the historian's particular interests in that subject. For instance, what dispositions are relevant to character? Plato would say a person's wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Aristotle would say their virtues and vices. Christians would say their selfishness and benevolence. Kant would say their willingness to abide by rational moral principles. Conservatives would say their respect for tradition and convention. What could a "fair" or "biased" description possibly mean in this context? An unbiased concept of character seems inconceivable.

A similar argument can be mounted about other historical subjects as well. For instance, historians' concepts of political structure vary, for all sorts of groups and institutions in a community exert power. It seems that there is no objective basis for deciding which power groups to include. Political parties in parliament might make the laws of a democratic country, but those who finance the election campaigns of those parties influence their decisions, as do those who get a hearing in their constituencies, namely the newspapers, radio, and TV, and pressure

1. In *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge, Eng., 1984) and *The Truth of History* (London, 1998).

groups who get publicity through them. This is all well known. But the families and personal friends of politicians can influence their decisions too. Unions and professional associations, with their capacity to organize industrial action, can influence government decision-making. The courts, with their powers of punishing those who break the law, must also be respected. In some countries, the armed forces take an interest in politics, and their capacity to influence events has to be accepted as well. Are they all part of a political structure? Some would exclude personal, judicial, and military groups from the realm of politics, but others would certainly include them. Historians who are impatient of providing a comprehensive account of a political structure will often content themselves with noting the influence of just one or two of these groups on the lawmakers. If they like a law, then they will look for some to praise for it, and if they do not like it, they will find people to blame. It is hard to imagine what a “fair” and “unbiased” account of a political process would be like.

Given such difficulties in defining historical subjects, should we abandon the concept of biased history altogether, as entirely meaningless? I suggest we should not, for there have been occasions on which it has been important to identify historical bias and to urge that it be corrected. The examples are familiar, but no less important for that. Women’s history is a response to the conviction that traditional history, written usually by white males, in which women were largely invisible, was unfair and biased. Joan Scott quotes Virginia Woolf’s remark in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) that history in her day “often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lop-sided.”<sup>2</sup> Scott goes on to describe ways in which women have tried to rectify this deficiency. Similarly, colonial history written by the colonizers used to ignore the views of the colonized. Henk Wesseling says that J. C. Van Leur, writing *Indonesian Trade and Society*, “reacted against the exclusively colonial approach, which constituted a distorted perspective and ignored vast areas of historical reality,” seeing history only through the eyes of Dutch rulers and traders.<sup>3</sup> Jim Sharpe, writing on history from below, notes that it helps “to correct and amplify that mainstream political history which is still the accepted canon in British historical studies,” namely history written from the perspective of those in power, history from above.<sup>4</sup> In each case historians have identified with the powerful, seeing events through their eyes, and with those whose culture is closest to their own. For a long time the bias was unconscious and culture-wide, but with the liberation and education of women, indigenous people, and the poor it became widely recognized and was largely corrected. If it persists today, it is in cases of personal, not cultural, bias.

These concerns about past bias in history seem quite intelligible. If a historian is describing a society, it seems inappropriate to use a concept of society that leaves out almost half its members. Similarly, if one is trying to understand the

2. Joan Scott, “Women’s History,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park, Pa., 1992), 49.

3. Henk Wesseling, “Overseas History,” in *ibid.*, 74.

4. Jim Sharpe, “History from Below,” in *ibid.*, 38.

interaction between colonizers and locals, one will get only half the picture if the local point of view is not explained. And in the political history of a society, the attempts of working men and women to achieve what they would regard as justice against those who would exploit them deserve respect, as well as the attempts of those in power to further their own interests.

Another area of history that has been subject to unacceptable bias has been national history. Those who have examined national histories draw attention to national prejudices at work in stereotyping both other nations and their own. V. R. Berghahn and H. Schissler, who have researched the matter, almost despair of correcting them. "One of the problems of stereotyping is, of course, that, although they present warped images of reality, stereotypes have proved extraordinarily resistant to enlightenment."<sup>5</sup> They suggest that foreigners might be able to detect distortions in a country's history of itself: "They may be able to perceive biases and gaps which elude the indigenous historian educated in a particular national tradition of looking at the past."<sup>6</sup> The problem they address is that of culture-wide bias.

One of the most interesting examples of national bias is that of North American and Russian historians. North Americans are proud of their liberal traditions, which have given enterprising people a chance to prosper with little impediment, and are appalled at the severe restrictions on individual freedom that existed under the communist regime. Russians, on the other hand, used to be taught to see history in Marxist terms, and see how the capitalist class in America exploits the working class and the people of overseas countries who work for them. On the other hand Russians are proud of their more egalitarian system in which they believe wealth has been more evenly distributed among the working people. Each presents the society of the other as more oppressive than it really is.<sup>7</sup> These forms of cultural bias have not been widely recognized and discussed.

Can we find an account of bias in history which allows that these various kinds of cultural bias are real and worrying? To understand how historical descriptions, interpretations, and explanations can be biased, one needs a clear idea of what such historical accounts are like.

### *Descriptive explanations*

When historians investigate a historical subject, they normally acquire masses of information about it, and they have to find a way of describing it that will represent it fairly without providing an exhaustive description of it. White and Ankersmit have been impressed by the sublimity of historical events, by the way they surpass our ability to conceive or describe them in all their mystery and par-

5. *Perceptions of History*, ed. Volker R. Berghahn and Hanna Schissler (Oxford, 1987), 14.

6. *Ibid.*, 15.

7. Deborah S. Hutton and Howard D. Mehlinger, "International Textbook Revision. Examples from the United States," in *Perceptions of History*, ed. Berghahn and Schissler, 146ff. See also Gwidon Zalejko, "Soviet Historiography as 'Normal Science,'" in *Historiography between Modernism and Postmodernism: Contributions to the Methodology of the Historical Research*, ed. Jerzy Topolski (Amsterdam, 1994), 179-190.

ticularity.<sup>8</sup> Both nature and history are sublime, and any account of them is inevitably selective. But such accounts can be true and not misleading for all that. The sublimity of nature and history is no reason for supposing accounts of them cannot be true. It simply implies that they cannot be exhaustive. How much detail historians include in their descriptions of a historical subject depends upon the scale of their writing, but they would only bore readers if they recorded every fact they knew. There can be several criteria of selection; for instance, they might include facts which, seemingly insignificant at the time, helped to produce important changes later on. But one important constraint upon historical descriptions is that they provide a fair account of the subject.

Previously I have analyzed the fairness of a historical description largely by saying it must not be misleading.<sup>9</sup> What does it mean to call a description misleading? Sometimes it means that the description warrants a general account of the subject which, on the data available about the subject, should not be believed. For example, if historians described only the good deeds of a person without mentioning the bad, then they imply he was a saint when, on the evidence, he was not.

There is another sense in which a selective description can be misleading as well. This is when historians, having established both the subject of the history and the degree of detail at which they are writing it, omit facts about the subject which, given the degree of detail, should have been included. The clearest examples of this kind of bias is in causal explanations, where some important causes are omitted because of a biased conviction that they are not important. Some, for instance, omit all reference to the interests of agents, and others more or less ignore commitment to principles as a cause of actions, reflecting their liberal or socialist leanings. Histories that omit important features of their subject are misleading in the sense that they are presented as complete, relative to their degree of detail, when they are not.

At this point a worry surfaces as to whether historical subjects can be so clearly defined that anyone can tell whether a description of them is complete at a given level of detail. As was mentioned before, there is some uncertainty as to what constitutes a person's character or a political system. Which dispositions are essential to character and which are not? Which sources of power are essential to a political system and which are not? At least it is clear that the adequacy of a description must be judged relative to some preconception of the general nature of the subject being described. For an account to be incomplete, it must have left out some important features of the subject, but to identify those we must have a preconception of the general nature of the subject to begin with. To describe what a historical subject was like, relative to some preconception of its general nature, is to provide a *descriptive explanation* of it.<sup>10</sup>

8. See F. R. Ankersmit, "Hayden White's Appeal to the Historians," *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 182-193.

9. McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, 58-61.

10. See *The Truth of History*, chapter 3.



In the past it was assumed that people shared a common understanding of the subjects of history, and perhaps they did. Today we are aware that our general preconceptions of historical subjects often differ, and indeed can be biased, in which case, a history that describes all the important features of a subject relative to one preconception of its nature could still be biased, if that preconception itself was biased. How much disagreement is there about the general nature of the subjects of history? And in what sense can preconceptions of these subjects be biased? Let us consider these questions in turn.

There are some constraints upon historians' preconceptions of historical subjects. Sometimes there is a very general concept of the subject that limits the way it can be conceived. A war is a military conflict between two societies in which each tries to defeat the other by force of arms. Whatever contributes to that conflict is relevant to a history of the war, though there is some uncertainty as to whether, say, the production of munitions, food, and medicine to be used by soldiers should be included or not. A revolution is a struggle between groups in a country in which one group seizes political power by force from another. Whatever contributes to that struggle is relevant to a history of revolution, though it is not clear whether the origins of the ideology of each side should be included. A biased general conception of a historical subject is one that is incomplete relative to some very general conception of it. For example, suppose you defined the working class by specifying all the trades and occupations of poorly paid males but omitted any reference to the work of women; this would be a gender-biased preconception of the class, for the working class in general includes all who received low wages when working for others.

There can be different preconceptions of a historical subject without any of them being partial or biased. Historians frequently choose an analysis which best explains changes in that subject. For instance, one could describe a country's economy by describing the sectors within it, and how they interact: agricultural, manufacturing, service industries, markets, and regulations. However, to understand changes in an economy these days, it is often more useful to describe the relations between elements of the economy and other economies in the world that provide markets, investment, monetary pressures, and even regulations which have a big impact on any country's economy.<sup>11</sup> Network models of social structures provide a useful adjunct to traditional structural models.

Sometimes there are different preconceptions of the nature of a historical subject, none of which is obviously superior to any other. In that case, each can be called an interpretation of the subject. History written in accordance with one of them might well reflect the preference of the historian, but there would be no ground for calling it biased, at least in any pejorative sense. There is a weaker sense of "bias," in which we call anything chosen in accordance with our preferences "biased," whether it is misleading or not. The choice of an initial subject

11. Harriet Friedmann, "Form and Substance in the Analysis of the World Economy," in *Social Structures, A Network Approach*, ed. Barry Wellman and S. D. Berkowitz (Cambridge, Eng., 1988), 304.

to describe is influenced by the historian's interest, as was said before, and so could be called "biased" in this weak sense. Similarly, the choice of a preconception of the nature of the subject, when no preconception is clearly superior to any other, can be biased in this weak sense of merely reflecting the historian's interests. It is not biased in the normal, full sense of the word, because there is nothing irrational or misleading about choosing one preconception of a subject instead of another when each is equally acceptable.

W. B. Gallie argued that some concepts in history are "essentially contested," namely "religion," "art," "science," "democracy," and "social justice." These are concepts for which "there is no one use of any of them which can be set up as its generally accepted and therefore correct or standard use."<sup>12</sup> When historians write the history of these subjects, they must choose an interpretation of the subject to guide them. For instance, in deciding what Art is, historians can choose between "configurationist theories, theories of aesthetic contemplation and response . . . , theories of art as expression, theories emphasising traditional artistic aims and standards, and communication theories."<sup>13</sup>

If a historian's preconception of a subject is not partial and biased, will a history that is written in conformity to it always be unbiased? Certainly not, for the information available to the historian about the subject might itself be biased, in which case a historian who is unaware of that bias cannot provide an unbiased interpretation of the subject. Let me explain. The accounts historians give of any subject are limited by the amount of information that can be inferred from remaining evidence. Sometimes there is a great amount and variety of evidence, so that a comprehensive account of the subject is possible. Sometimes, through chance events, the evidence is patchy, so that parts of the subject can be described but not all of it. In these cases the resulting history is partial, incomplete, but not necessarily biased. Finally, it can happen that the evidence that is available has been selected for preservation by someone who wanted to present the subject in a certain light for anyone who might investigate it. Thus a civil servant might destroy evidence of unorthodox procedures; a politician might destroy evidence of unauthorized income and expenditure; a wife might destroy letters from a lover; and so on. Biased sources can yield biased history, that is, history that is partial because someone has influenced the process of historical reconstruction in accordance with his or her own preferences. In these cases the historian could have been quite unbiased, filling out details of the subject in accordance with her reasonable preconception of it, but the result would be biased just the same.

Before leaving this account of bias in descriptive explanations, I would like to draw attention to a source of misunderstanding of the past, even though it is not a case of bias. This occurs when the subject of a history is not clearly defined, and readers take the subject to be much broader than it really is. In these cases the account of the chosen subject might be fair, but readers' understanding is mistaken because they take it to be of a much broader subject. Suppose, for example, his-

12. W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London, 1964), 157.

13. *Ibid.* 176

torians are interested in the British experience of colonizing Australia. If that is the subject of their inquiry, they will pay little if any attention to the Aborigines' experience of being colonized. They will describe interactions between the British and the Aborigines from the British perspective alone, thus giving the reader an incomplete account of events, often misrepresenting the Aborigines' motives by reporting only the British understanding of them. If the reader assumes that the history is providing a fair account of these encounters, then the reader will judge the histories biased, being partial in both senses of the word.

Such cases of inadvertent misunderstanding are difficult to guard against, because readers do not always pay enough attention to the limitations of the task the historian has undertaken.

This is a matter of considerable concern because misleading impressions can have political and other serious implications. I think the best way of avoiding misunderstanding in such cases is for historians to state very clearly the parameters of their inquiry, perhaps even denying that it is meant to provide a fair account of those general aspects of the subject it touches upon (such as Aboriginal responses to colonization).

### *General interpretations*

An interpretation of something is one of several, equally well-justified accounts of it which can be given. In this sense, historical descriptions and explanations can be interpretations, when there is more than one equally satisfactory way of describing a historical subject, or of explaining a historical event. Sometimes the word "interpretation" is used more narrowly, to refer to a higher-order description of a historical subject, which is justified on the basis of lower-order information about it. Colligatory terms are commonly used in such interpretations: describing patterns of events as revolutions or evolutions, growths or declines, fights or compromises, and so on. These are interpretations because, inevitably, there is more than one such general account that can be given of the historical subject.

There are several different criteria for choosing among alternative general interpretations. Historians prefer those which give meaning to a large number of facts about the subject, and which make their occurrence intelligible. Such interpretations often reflect the interests of the historian who presents them, but they are biased only when they are misleading. They are misleading when they imply facts about the subject of the interpretation that are, on the available evidence, probably false.

For instance, it is astounding how many interpretations have been given of the English Civil War.<sup>14</sup> It is often hard to tell whether a historian's interpretation was just mistaken, or in fact biased by his or her interests. Pretty clearly R. H. Tawney's interpretation of it as a conflict between the declining aristocracy and the emerging middle class reflected his Marxist preconception of the nature of historical change, which he probably had a personal, conscientious interest in

14. For a list of interpretations see McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, 114-116.

promoting. Conrad Russell has pointed out that there were members of both classes on both sides of the war. Christopher Hill, as is well known, abandoned a Marxist interpretation of the War once he examined the data closely.<sup>15</sup>

### *Causal explanations*

A good causal explanation describes all the events that significantly altered the probability of the occurrence of the event being explained. Clearly, a brief explanation will mention just the major causes, and a more detailed explanation will describe minor causes as well. But relative to the level of detail, all should be included. One way in which historical explanations can be biased is by selecting just those causes which the historian has an interest in highlighting, and ignoring others of equal significance.

A good example of biased explanation is provided by A. D. Moses' recent discussion of explanations of the Holocaust.<sup>16</sup> Moses identifies two common kinds of explanation: "ideological-intentionalist" and "structural-functionalist." The first ascribes the Holocaust to Hitler and the German people, both driven by an anti-Semitic ideology; the second blames the patterns of obedience found in any bureaucracy or army, in which bureaucrats or soldiers fail to consider the morality of the policies which they conscientiously implement according to duty. Of course the true explanation will be a complex one, but it seems likely that it will include both these kinds of causes. An explanation in terms of just one would be incomplete, and probably biased, as the first blames the Germans more than the second, which blames "the system."

Hugh Stretton analyzed bias in historical explanation ages ago, very convincingly, in his book *The Political Sciences*. One of his simplest examples is of different explanations of the outbreak of the First World War. Liberals blamed it upon a failure of diplomacy in the months before the event; Marxists attributed it to capitalism and the competitive imperialism which it generated; whereas conservatives thought the war was the result of innate human avarice, ambition, aggression, and so on.<sup>17</sup> In fact tension between the Great Powers had increased during their competition for colonies, making war significantly more likely; and the murder of the Austrian archduke Ferdinand in Serbia, given the system of alliances, made it even more so. The failure of diplomacy explains why the war was not averted, rather than why the war occurred.

The explanation being discussed attributes the First World War in major part to the tension that had arisen between nations from their competition for colonies. This is, in fact, a high-level description of a causal process that a historian of the period would describe in detail: for instance, the rivalry between Austria and Russia in the Balkans, between France and Germany in Morocco, and between Britain and Germany at sea. One way in which causal explanations

15. *Ibid.*, 132.

16. A. D. Moses, "Structure and Agency in the Holocaust: Daniel J. Goldhagen and his Critics," *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 194-219.

17. Hugh Stretton, *The Political Sciences* (London, 1969), 56-60.

can be biased is, as has been said, by omitting important causes which the historian has an interest in hiding.

Another way is by producing general accounts of causal processes whose implications are false, and doing so from personal interest. To switch the example to explanations of the American Civil War, historians have debated whether it should be described as a dispute over slavery, or over states' rights, or over different economic interests, or perhaps all three. J. F. Rhodes declared that the war was over slavery, but Charles and Mary Beard argued that slavery was not an important issue between the leaders of the North and the South, none of whom wanted emancipation before the war, so that the causes of the war should not be characterized as a dispute over slavery.<sup>18</sup> This is disingenuous, however, for Southern fear of emancipation once the North got control of Congress was real enough. The Beards were wedded to an economic theory of historical change, which found little room for other motives.

We have, then, a clear enough idea of what it means to call historical descriptions, interpretations, and explanations biased. For descriptions of historical subjects to be biased they must exclude significant features of the subject, at the chosen level of generality, according to some fair preconception of that subject, and on the basis of ample, unbiased evidence. For general interpretations of the past to be biased, they must imply facts about the past that it is reasonable to believe to be false. For causal explanations to be biased they must omit causes of equal significance to those which have been included. And for general interpretations of causal processes to be biased they must imply historical facts that there is reason to judge false. For these failings to be cases of bias, and not just mistakes, the error must be motivated by the historian's interests, be they personal or culture-wide.

## II. DOES BIAS MATTER?

Before considering whether bias can be avoided, it would be sensible to ask whether bias in history matters. The objections to biased history are pretty obvious, but given recent neglect of the subject, they are worth rehearsing.

There are several reasons for objecting to bias in history, and indeed in any accounts of everyday life. Biased histories generally purport to provide a fair account of their subject but in fact do not, and so are misleading. This is intrinsically bad. Biased histories can also have bad consequences; biased accounts of what has happened usually result in injustice. Second, they cause misunderstanding of the structures and processes involving the things they describe, which can result in inappropriate strategies for altering them. Let me explain each of these objections to bias in turn.

Biased descriptions are often unjust, presenting a one-sided impression of their subject that accords with the historian's interests. For instance, a biased biography will present either the admirable or deplorable aspects of a person's charac-

18. Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York, 1927), II, 36-38.

ter, abilities, and contribution to society. A biased account of an institution will emphasize the role of those aspects the historian wants to praise or blame for its success or failure, ignoring the equally significant contribution of others.

Biased explanations of actions and events refer to some of the reasons for which they occurred but not all. This is another way in which historians flatter people or institutions they like, and denigrate those they dislike. It is obvious that such a practice results in histories that are quite unjust. Thus histories that attribute industrial strikes to the greed of the workers rather than to the injustice of the employers, or vice versa, when both are involved, are biased and unjust. Histories that attribute wars to the hostility of one party without mentioning the provocation of the other, when both were involved, are also biased and unjust. Such injustice is familiar, but it can be damaging in every case, for example by aggravating industrial unrest and international distrust in the cases just cited. Historians and commentators have a social responsibility to provide fair explanations of what happens, not biased ones.

Biased explanations produce misunderstanding that is not only unjust but can have serious consequences. Sometimes explanations of social facts are attributed to individuals when social structures have been largely to blame. For instance some blame the unemployed for their plight, citing laziness, lack of qualifications, and a dissolute life-style as the reasons for their not having a job. The fact that there is only one job available for, say, every ten unemployed is not mentioned, even though this increases tremendously the probability of someone being unemployed. Alternatively, occasionally historians blame structural facts about the market and competition for falling economic returns, ignoring the ineptitude of those in power. Biased accounts like these fuel a misunderstanding of the processes involved, in these cases, in unemployment and economic failure. They can result in quite inappropriate responses, such as exhorting the unemployed to try harder while doing nothing to increase the number of available jobs; or adopting a *laissez faire* policy towards economic growth.

Most of these points are well known, but the damage caused by biased accounts is not widely acknowledged. Social injustice and misunderstanding are very serious indeed, and scholars should do all they can to prevent them by avoiding bias as much as possible.

Some of those who write partial, biased history would probably argue that, far from promoting injustice, it is written to correct massive injustices in the communities it addresses. So often women, blacks, the poor, the colonized, and the environment have been ignored both by Western communities and by their historians. Some would say that by focusing upon their history more or less exclusively, historians redress the imbalance; they make people notice them and value them, and, they hope, treat them justly in the future.

This is a powerful argument, but a worry remains. To focus upon oppressed people alone runs the risk of ignoring the reasons others had for their behavior towards them. Aborigines viewed those who took their children away to white, state institutions with horror; but the whites often acted for what they judged to

be the good of those children. We now know them to have been dreadfully mistaken. But to portray them as heartless violators of Aboriginal families, from the Aboriginal perspective, and say nothing about the way they interpreted their own actions, would be to demonize them unjustly, and might create attitudes of revulsion towards them among Aboriginal people which they do not entirely deserve. In many cases the privileged have simply exploited those under them in the most heartless way, but their wickedness should be exposed by a careful consideration of their motives, and not merely by reporting the opinions of their victims.

Clearly bias in history should be avoided. But can it be? Can a historian's social responsibility of providing fair descriptions, interpretations, and explanations of social events be fulfilled? There are three commonly held reasons for denying the possibility of avoiding bias in history. The first is that historians' interests will inevitably influence their judgment in deciding how to conceive of a historical subject, in deciding what information to select for inclusion in their history of it, and in choosing words with which to present it. The second is the belief that, just as a historian's account of the past is inevitably biased, so too are the reports of events by contemporaries upon which historians rely. Some think there is no objective information about historical events which historians can use to describe them. The third is that, even if historians' individual biases can be corrected, and even if facts about the past can be known, historians are still products of their culture, of its language, concepts, beliefs, and attitudes, so that the possibility of an impartial, fair description of past events still remains unattainable. I shall consider each of these reasons in turn.

### III. BIAS CAUSED BY INDIVIDUAL INTERESTS

Some have thought bias to be unavoidable. Historians' interests, they suppose, direct every aspect of their interpretation of past events: the concepts they use to describe them, their selection of evidence to support them, and the words with which they present them. There have been three different responses to this assumption. Some have supposed it means an end to the discipline of critical history: each history will reflect the interests of those who wrote it, and no more can be said. Others have allowed that history can be critical in its use of sources, but think that historians will always pick out facts about the past which interest them, so there is no possibility of better or worse representations of historical subjects. Every representation will be partial, in both senses, and so biased. Others have tried to minimize the influence of the historian by letting past people tell their own stories as much as possible; and some also advocate as many voices about a subject as possible, to get as many perspectives on it as one can. Each perspective will be biased, but the variety will be, well, interesting.

#### *The end of the discipline*

F. R. Ankersmit has reflected upon the way in which postmodern writers view history, as he does himself, as the product of the historian's world, of his or her ideas, materials, and interests. The resulting history is sometimes presented as a repre-

sentation of the past, but really, Ankersmit says, it is merely a substitute for the past (“for the postmodernist historical representation essentially consists of the production of a linguistic object that has the cultural function of being a substitute for the absent past.”<sup>19</sup>) Consequently, it makes no sense to ask whether one historian’s account represents the past more adequately than another historian’s interpretation of the same subject. Each, from the postmodern perspective, is simply the product of the individual historian’s creative activity. Ankersmit concludes: “this objectification of subjectivity effectively rules out the possibility of meaningful debate between individual students of historiography. . . . In a certain sense, then, postmodernist historiography means the death of historiography *as a discipline*.”<sup>20</sup>

Beverley Southgate has expressed the same concerns recently in *History: What and Why?* He notes that previously historians could debate explanations and interpretations “within agreed parameters.” He goes on: “The problem now is that even those vestiges of possible methodological compatibility have come under question, and the postmodern predicament seems to imply that effectively ‘anything goes.’”<sup>21</sup> Keith Jenkins has reached the same conclusion: “In fact history now appears to be just one more foundationless, positioned expression in a world of foundationless, positioned expressions.”<sup>22</sup>

### *The inevitability of bias*

A second response to the influence of interests upon historical inquiry is less skeptical, but still resigned to partiality. Women have noticed male biases in past historical writing, biases which men did not acknowledge, and this has led them to doubt the possibility of unbiased history. As Joan Scott writes: “women’s history throws open all the questions of mastery and objectivity on which disciplinary norms are built.” It “suggests not only that history as it is is incomplete, but also that historians’ mastery of the past is necessarily partial.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, whereas men might describe how women in the past were subordinated to men, both publicly and privately, women would explain how they were exploited, excluded, and marginalized, presenting quite a different account of their place in society.<sup>24</sup> There seems to be no neutral (neutered?) perspective from which to write women’s history. Indeed, as Scott explains, it has been found that different

19. F. R. Ankersmit, “The Origins of Postmodernist Historiography,” in *Historiography between Modernism and Postmodernism*, ed. Topolski, 107. Compare his discussion of “microstories,” i.e. histories of individual episodes such as those described in Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms*. Ankersmit writes: “The ‘microstories’ are not representative of anything, nor is anything else [in the past] representative of them. The effect of these ‘microstories’ is . . . to make historiography representative only of itself; they possess a self-referential capacity very similar to the means of expression used by the relevant modern painters. Just as in modern painting, the aim is no longer to hint at a ‘reality’ behind the representation, but to absorb ‘reality’ into the representation itself.” (“Historical Representation,” *History and Theory* 27 [1988], 227-228).

20. Ankersmit, “The Origins of Postmodernist Historiography,” 117.

21. Beverley Southgate, *History: What and Why?* (London, 1996), 109.

22. *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (London, 1997), 6.

23. Scott, “Women’s History,” 51-52.

24. *Ibid.*, 58.



women see women's history differently, depending on their color, religion, sexual orientation, marital status, class, and so on.<sup>25</sup>

It is commonly thought that, as Carol Gilligan put it, men view the world from a "justice perspective," and women from a "care perspective." Men view society as consisting of separate individuals working for their own good in competition with others, often applying rather general rules when deciding how to behave, and more generally prone to abstract, logical thinking. Women, by contrast, perhaps from having lived so long in a familial, domestic environment, see people in relationship to others, with responsibilities for one another, deciding what to do by considering the particular implications for others of each course of action. They value the concrete and particular in itself, rather than as instances of universals, or as means to ends.<sup>26</sup> This contrast between male and female perspectives on the world was truer in the past than in the present, but it illustrates the extent to which different groups, even within the same general culture, can see things differently. The implication drawn by feminist historians is that, although women's histories can be justified on the basis of available evidence, they will inevitably be partial, telling only of those aspects of the past which women find of value, and usually focusing upon the experiences of women in different historical situations.

#### *A preference for multiple perspectives*

A third response to problems of perspective is that adopted by Peter Burke: "In this situation [of multiple viewpoints], our understanding of [past] conflicts is surely enhanced by a presentation of opposite viewpoints, rather than by an attempt, like Acton's, to articulate a consensus. We have moved from the ideal of the Voice of History to that of heteroglossia, defined as 'varied and opposing voices.'"<sup>27</sup> An example he cites of such a history is Richard Price's *Alabi's World* (Baltimore, 1990), in which the government of Surinam in the eighteenth century is described by black slaves, Dutch administrators, Moravian missionaries, and finally by the historian himself. He endorses such a multiplicity of perspectives as "a possible solution to the problem" of overcoming bias.<sup>28</sup>

These three responses all assume that there is no way of establishing the superiority of one interpretation over others, and no way of coordinating different interpretations of the past that might be given. Close analysis shows that these assumptions are not always justified. I shall argue that although cultural bias is difficult to avoid, personal bias can be largely overcome.

#### IV. OVERCOMING PERSONAL BIAS

Foucault has brilliantly demonstrated how sometimes people's conceptions of things change in accordance with their interests and preferences, particularly

25. *Ibid.*, 56.

26. Freya Mathews, "From Epistemology to Spirituality: Feminist Perspectives," *Journal of Dharma* 23 (1998), 526-527.

27. Peter Burke, "Overture," *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Burke, 6.

28. *Ibid.*, 239.

their interest in power. He leaves us with the impression that a historian's interests will inevitably determine the interpretation he or she provides of the past. I have argued strenuously for the influence of interests on human behavior, an influence of which the agents are often unaware.<sup>29</sup> It seems to follow that an objective, unbiased interpretation would have to be one not affected by interests, commitments, and preferences. This, I suppose, explains why Thomas Haskell began his defense of the possibility of objective history by pointing out the virtues of "detachment,"<sup>30</sup> a capacity to set one's interests aside while one investigates evidence for one's account of the past. "To be dissatisfied with the view of the world as it initially appears to us, and to struggle to formulate a superior, more inclusive, less self-centered alternative, is to strive for detachment and aim at objectivity."<sup>31</sup> He describes detachment, fairness, and honesty as "ascetic virtues."<sup>32</sup>

The trouble with the word "detachment" is that it suggests one is not committed to anything, that one is standing aloof from the fray of historical inquiry, like an ascetic saint removed from the temptations of the world. It is good to remain detached from preferred outcomes while inquiry proceeds, at least to the extent of considering the available evidence and its implications rationally. This is perhaps all that Haskell means by the word. But more than this detachment from preferred outcomes is required to produce good history.

Haskell asserts that such detachment is "compatible with strong political commitment,"<sup>33</sup> but he does not explain how these are in fact compatible. I suggest that what makes a history as objective as it can be is not detachment, but a commitment to standards of rational inquiry which is stronger than one's commitment to a certain outcome. Sceptics suppose that we cannot fairly consider possibilities that differ from those we prefer, but as Haskell points out, historians often do precisely that.<sup>34</sup> To be committed to standards of rational inquiry is to apply standards of rational assessment in the process of historical investigation. It is not to be detached, but to be committed to a certain way of thinking.

This suggestion does not imply a denial of free will. A commitment to rational standards of inquiry might well be the result of considering how important it is that our descriptions of the past be rationally justified, so that they are not misleading. Philosophers who believe that recognition of the value of an activity will cause people to desire it are known as "internalists." The "externalists" are those who think people are motivated only by recognition of a situation which relates to their existing desires, and thus causes them to desire to perform a certain activity. They would say that the way to motivate historians to be rational is to point out that their work will be subject to peer review according to commonly accept-

29. In McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, 250-258, and elsewhere.

30. Thomas Haskell, "Objectivity is not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*," *History and Theory* 29 (1990), 132.

31. *Ibid.*, 132.

32. *Ibid.*, 133.

33. *Ibid.*, 134.

34. *Ibid.*, 135.

ed standards of rationality, and that their future careers depend upon that review being favorable. Both internal and external reasons for thinking rationally are valid. We should appeal both to the consciences of historians to produce socially responsible history, and to their interest in obtaining favorable peer reviews.

I have already pointed out the value of unbiased history. But if people think such history is unattainable, they might nevertheless judge it a foolish goal. I would argue that although absolute freedom from bias cannot ever be guaranteed, the deliberate attempt to create descriptions, interpretations, and explanations of past events rationally, giving careful consideration to possibilities other than those preferred by the historian, will go a long way towards reducing it.

Alfred Mele, in a recent book entitled *Autonomous Agents: From Self-Control to Autonomy*, in a chapter on "Self-Control and Belief," describes ways in which desire can produce biased beliefs.<sup>35</sup> He outlines four ways this can happen. "Negative misrepresentation" is not seeing that data counts against a proposition  $p$  when, in the absence of desire for  $p$ 's being true, it would be easily recognized as such. "Positive misinterpretation" is supposing certain data supports  $p$  when, in the absence of desire for  $p$ , it would easily be seen not to do so. "Selective focusing/attending" is focusing upon evidence supporting  $p$  because of a desire for it, and failing to attend to evidence against  $p$ . Finally, "selective evidence gathering" is overlooking easily obtainable evidence against  $p$ , and searching for less accessible evidence for  $p$ , because of a desire that  $p$  be true.

Notice that the desire that  $p$  be true does not stop people from seeking some sort of rational justification for believing it. So when I say that to avoid bias historians must both strongly desire and be committed to rational procedures of inquiry and critical assessment of their conclusions, what I mean is that the procedures of inquiry and assessment be such as are most likely to yield an unbiased result. The procedures outlined by Mele, unfortunately, would have precisely the opposite effect.

Mele refers to a study by the psychologist Ziva Kunda of experiments on "motivated reasoning," which includes some interesting findings. When people are motivated to be accurate, and do not desire any particular outcome from their inquiry, then they do reach more accurate results than they would otherwise, so long as they have not examined the data prior to the motivation being established.<sup>36</sup> For this to happen, "it is crucial that subjects possess more appropriate reasoning strategies, view these as superior to other strategies, and be capable of accessing them at will."<sup>37</sup> This fact is a good reason for making historians aware of how their descriptions, interpretations, and explanations should be rationally arrived at and assessed.

Sometimes, Kunda notes, when investigators who want a certain outcome are challenged to be accurate, the result is not improved accuracy but more elaborate defenses of their preferred result.<sup>38</sup> Although people naturally look for support

35. Alfred R. Mele, *Autonomous Agents: From Self-Control to Autonomy* (New York, 1995), 95-96.

36. Ziva Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," *Psychological Bulletin* 108 (1990), 481-482.

37. *Ibid.*, 482.

38. *Ibid.*, 487.

for their preferred hypotheses, Kunda remarks that this tendency towards hypothesis confirmation “is eliminated when people are led to consider inconsistent evidence.”<sup>39</sup> It is clearly important that people who desire a certain outcome for their inquiries carefully and deliberately subject the outcome to critical evaluation, for as Kunda says: “motivated illusions can be dangerous when they are used to guide behavior and decisions, especially in those cases in which objective reasoning could facilitate more adaptive behavior.”<sup>40</sup>

There is some reason to think historians will resist entreaties to be rational and critical in their work. The history profession, like other academic professions, values novelty so that if historians discover some new evidence, a new explanation, or a novel interpretation, they are tempted to exaggerate its significance in order to produce a novel account. If it is found to be inaccurate, that will produce a lively discussion in the literature, which is good for one’s reputation as well. But this is to put personal advancement ahead of scholarly and social responsibility, and so the practice should be condemned. Historians should publish only those new descriptions, explanations, and interpretations which they have tested and found to be rationally justified.

Scholars have extolled reason over bias for many years, so one must wonder why there is so much skepticism about achieving fair-minded conclusions today. I think an important reason is the failure of some philosophers of history to appreciate just how rational historical knowledge can be. Frank Ankersmit has done much to promote this skepticism, as noted above, because he was convinced that historical descriptions, interpretations, and explanations represent little more than a historian’s point of view. In *Narrative Logic*<sup>41</sup> and later works, Ankersmit did not analyze actual historical narratives in any detail, so he remained unaware of their rational structures. For example, colligatory concepts such as “evolution” and “revolution” cannot be applied just at will, but must correctly represent what is known of the subject. An evolution is a more or less consistent gradual change in some properties of a subject; whereas a revolution is a sudden, major change in its properties. The criteria are a bit vague, but not so vague as to make rational judgment impossible. (For example, see the debate over Elton’s thesis of a “revolution” in Tudor government.<sup>42</sup>) Then again, some narratives explain certain outcomes by picking out important causes, and showing how they influenced events to produce the event being explained. If important causes are omitted, the explanation is incomplete. Ankersmit declared that historical narratives present the historian’s view of the subject, from the historian’s unique perspective. He concluded: “The ‘historical landscape’ is not *given* to the historian; he has to *construct* it. The narratio [narrative] is not the projection of a historical landscape or of some historical machinery, the past is only *constituted* in the narratio. The

39. *Ibid.*, 495.

40. *Ibid.*, 495-496.

41. F. R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language* (The Hague, 1983).

42. For details, see McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, 68-69.

structure of the narratio is a structure *lent* to or *pressed* on the past and not the reflection of a kindred structure objectively present in the past itself.”<sup>43</sup>

Had Ankersmit noted the close logical relations between the structures of narratives, be they general descriptions or causal explanations, and the data they interpret, he would not have said they are just “pressed on the past.” Rather, narratives can be logically justified by what is known of the past, and in that sense they emerge from it. These days we would probably say that the higher-level descriptions of the past that are illustrated by historical narratives “supervene” upon the particular facts that justify them. Admittedly they are sometimes metaphorical, but metaphors can be true or false of their subject, namely when the relevant salient properties of the metaphor resemble those of the subject of the metaphorical statement.<sup>44</sup> The words “revolution” and “evolution” are applied metaphorically to the past, but we know just how to use them.

Recently Ankersmit has explored the relation between a narrative account of past events and a higher-order description of that narrative presentation. For example, one could give a narrative of events that constituted the Cold War, and could then describe it as a Cold War, which would be to describe that presentation of events correctly.<sup>45</sup> He likens this to a picture of Marlon Brando that shows him to be surly, and a description of it as showing Brando as surly.<sup>46</sup> Then he points out that the descriptions of particular events that constitute a historical narrative “are by no means merely a matter of a ‘projection’ onto the historical reality, for there is most certainly an agreement between text and reality here.”<sup>47</sup> So in a way, the description of the events presented in a narrative as “a Cold War” is, in fact, a description of historical reality. He expresses this in the following words: “this showing under a particular aspect is far from being exclusively a question of viewpoint, of seeing the past from an angle that as such is independent of past reality itself. For just as a certain quality of the represented reality actually corresponds to the ‘representing as-’ in the picture—think of Brando’s surliness—so this is also true of the ‘representing as-’ in the writing of history.”<sup>48</sup>

How can one account for this astounding change of mind? Previously he had said that historical narratives do not reflect patterns to be found in past events themselves; and now he says they can. In his article, he refers to criticisms of Goodman’s theory of resemblance, as applied to pictures and their subjects. Goodman had denied that pictures resemble their subjects in any straightforward sense, but his critics have said his attack “should stimulate us to inquire more closely into what we (may legitimately) mean when we speak about the resemblance between picture and depicted rather than to concur with Goodman’s more

43. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 86.

44. C. Behan McCullagh, “Metaphor and Truth in History,” *Clio* 23 (1993), 24-49; and McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, 75-81.

45. Frank Ankersmit, “Statements, Texts and Pictures,” in *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (London, 1995), 226.

46. *Ibid.*, 229.

47. *Ibid.*, 230.

48. *Ibid.*

extremist remarks to the effect that resemblance plays no role *whatsoever* in pictorial representation.”<sup>49</sup> Ankersmit has certainly revised his view that there is absolutely no resemblance between historical narrative interpretations and the past events which they describe.

Ankersmit went on, in this article, to discuss ways in which the form of a history can be seen to correspond with its content. One example is of the way in which Bruni, noting the presence or absence of public debate in Florence, divided his history into periods of political freedom or lack of it, thus “harmonizing the form and content of his historiography.”<sup>50</sup> I wonder if Ankersmit had also reflected upon Hayden White’s admission that one could not write the life of President Kennedy as a comedy<sup>51</sup>—in other words that the form of a history is indeed constrained by the events it describes?

Another influence may have been the work of David Carr, who has argued that teleological narratives, designed to show how people work out their plans and policies, can correspond to what really happened in the past, and so be true as narrative wholes. In cases like these, he writes, “historical narrative shares with those events a constitutive form. On this view narrative is a mode of being before it is a mode of knowing.” Consequently there is no “formal obstacle to the truthfulness or fidelity of narratives.”<sup>52</sup> This is a telling example of narrative structure mirroring the structure of events as we understand them. Closer examination of the nature of historical narratives and their relation to historical events would enable him to discover the objective basis of the narrative interpretations in the events they describe.

I have argued that personal bias can be largely overcome by a commitment to standards of rational historical inquiry. Some, like Peter Burke, are attracted to the idea that bias is best corrected by presenting multiple views of a historical subject. (See page 54 above.) In this way, it is assumed, the bias of each reporter will be corrected by the bias of the others. Certainly if the reports are from people involved in a historical process, like the slaves, administrators, missionaries, and others in a colonial situation, then getting the views of all the groups involved would provide a very full account of the events with which they were involved. It is hard, though not impossible, for one historian to enter the mental worlds of all the various participants, especially when they are so different. However it is wrong for historians to regard themselves as nothing more than collectors of views. The historian’s task is to create an account of the history that will explain why each group had the views of it which it had. The historian’s view of past events is not just another to be put alongside the views of participants. Historians use the views of participants as evidence to be explained. Their reconstruction of events is built upon the views of those who witnessed them, and is normally less biased than the views of participants.

49. *Ibid.*, 231.

50. *Ibid.*, 234.

51. Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” *Clio* 3 (1974), 281.

52. David Carr, “Getting the Story Straight: Narrative and Historical Knowledge,” in *History: A History of the Discipline*, ed. Topolski, 123.

## V. THE OBJECTIVITY OF HISTORICAL DATA

To minimize the possibility of bias, historians should check that their descriptions, interpretations, and explanations are well supported by the data concerning their subjects that is available to them. There are problems with this suggestion. The first is that the evidence that has survived has often been preserved according to the interests of past archivists; and if it is in written form, it reflects the preconceptions and interests of its authors; so some think that it cannot possibly be considered a reliable source of knowledge about the past. The second problem is that when historians interpret evidence, they do so according to their own preconceptions and interests, so some think that the conclusions they draw from it must themselves be biased. Alun Munslow, for instance, concludes:

we cannot verify the past by the evidence. Evidence is not past reality because our access to it must be through many intermediaries—absence, gaps and silences, the contrived nature of the archive, signifier-referent collapse, the historian's bias and, not least, the structure of the historian's imposed and contrived narrative argument. It is probably best to view historical narratives as propositions about how we might represent a past reality, suggestions of possible correspondences rather than the correspondence.<sup>53</sup>

Historians have long been aware that the data available to them have often been selected by archivists for certain purposes, and that written documents reflect the concepts and interests of their authors. Their response has been not to take data at its face value, so to speak, but to construct explanations of its origins that will account for its features as fully as possible. They then look for coherence among the various explanations to decide what really happened. If the English describe the Battle of Waterloo as a great victory for Wellington over Napoleon, and the French describe it as an unlucky defeat thanks largely to the Prussian army which came late in the day to support Wellington, historians have little difficulty in working out what really happened, and why the accounts differ as they do. Historians use their own language and beliefs, both general and historical, in arriving at these explanatory accounts. If the evidence is extensive and varied, and one explanation of what happened is far superior to any other, then historians quite rationally judge it likely to be true. For it seems likely to be part of the ideal explanation of our observations of the world, which is true if the things in the world are such as would produce all the possible observations the ideal theory entails.

Marc Bloch, the great historian of medieval France, describes a large array of forgeries and mistakes in historical evidence in chapter three of *The Historian's Craft*. He describes some of the numerous ways in which they come about. But he also makes the point that misleading evidence is not always the source of error in historical inquiry, but data that can reveal new truths about the past. He writes:

fraud is, in its way, a piece of evidence. Merely to prove that the famous charter of Charlemagne to the church at Aix-la-Chapelle is not authentic is to avoid error, but not to acquire knowledge. On the other hand, should we succeed in proving that the forgery was

53. Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London, 1997), 69.

committed by the followers of Frederick Barbarossa [the German Holy Roman Emperor 1152–1190], and that it was designed to implement dreams of imperial grandeur, we open new vistas upon the vast perspectives of history.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed Bloch refutes the assumption of some philosophers that historians generally regard their evidence as entirely reliable, and that the revelation that it could be biased suddenly renders all their conclusions suspect. Critical historians always interpret their evidence cautiously. As Bloch remarks:

experience shows that there are no witnesses whose statements are equally reliable on all subjects under all circumstances. There is no reliable witness in the absolute sense. There is only more or less reliable testimony. Two principal sorts of circumstances impair the accuracy of perception of even the most gifted person. The first depends upon the condition of the observer at the time—such, for example, as his fatigue or emotion—the second upon the degree of his attention.<sup>55</sup>

Bloch goes on to explain: “In fact, we can never establish a date, we can never verify, and, in short, we can never interpret a document except by inserting it into a chronological series or a synchronous whole.”<sup>56</sup> In fact historians interpret documents by constructing the best available explanation for whole groups of reports and evidence about the events they study.<sup>57</sup>

This is not to say that historians can always get to the facts behind biased evidence. The available evidence might have been so culled as to yield an inaccurate impression of events. But critical historians are wary of limited, official records, and would be reluctant to draw any certain conclusions from them. Sometimes the significance of the available evidence is impossible to determine. Miles Fairburn, for instance, has exposed the difficulty of discovering the nature of mental illness among women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, given that both male and female accounts of it are likely to have been biased.<sup>58</sup> According to the literary historian Elaine Showalter, male psychiatrists declared any woman insane whose behavior did not conform to the norm they preferred, of women being mothers and homemakers. Some of these women were classified as hysterical, and later as schizophrenic, and treatment, she says, was often designed to restore them to the male vision of normality. Showalter adds that there could have been real cases of hysteria, brought on by female subordination, but what makes it difficult to discover the truth of the matter is that even females adopted the views of the men in reporting the state of patients, ascribing mental illness to sexual frustration and the stress of social ambition. Finding any unbiased evidence about women’s mental illness is obviously very difficult, so that it is hard to infer their actual condition.

The way in which historians draw inferences from evidence, reckoning with its bias, is quite well known. Why, therefore, are some philosophers skeptical about the truth of conclusions drawn in this way? It is because they see histori-

54. Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (Manchester, Eng., 1954), 93.

55. *Ibid.*, 101.

56. *Ibid.*, 110.

57. See McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, chapters 2 and 5.

58. Miles Fairburn, *Social History: Problems, Strategies and Methods* (London, 1999), 189–197.



cal descriptions as products of the historian's culture and interests, and as nothing more. They simply deny that these descriptions refer to anything that happened in the past. Did you notice Munslow's reference to the "signifier-referent collapse" in the quotation above? Having referred to Saussure's theory that signs are arbitrarily related to what they signify, and are defined in contrast to other signs,<sup>59</sup> Munslow went on to cite Barthes's claim that "the historian deliberately confuses or conflates the signified with the referent, producing a signifier-referent correspondence" which is unjustified.<sup>60</sup> The claim is that although words appear to refer to things, they really relate to concepts and, indirectly, to other words. The concepts that they signify are products of culture. The words historians use appear to describe the world, often in great detail, but in fact they relate only to concepts in the historian's mind.

Certainly historical descriptions employ concepts with which a historian is familiar before investigating the past. But this does not mean that the descriptions can tell us nothing about the external world. Our knowledge of the present world is framed by concepts and words, mental and linguistic entities, but that does not mean our descriptions of the world do not refer to external events. Just think of what warrants our descriptions of the world. They rest ultimately upon perceptions, which are given to us in experience, interpreted certainly according to our preconceptions and interests, but given just the same. If we perceive a computer screen in front of us, and not, say, a vase of flowers, then in normal circumstances we are warranted in saying there is a computer screen in front of us. What we imply by this is that there is something in the world producing those perceptions in us, and that it can produce all the experiences we would expect if it were, as we envisage it to be, a computer screen. It would feel hard, the words on it would change as I typed, and so on. Our descriptions of the world account for our perceptions by postulating a cause of them that has many perceptible implications. The descriptions are true if there really is something in the world that could cause all the perceptions implied by our descriptions of it. Of course we cannot access the world independent of our perceptions of it, or even discover if all the implications of our descriptions of the world are true. But if a description explains a lot of perceptions better than any other description does, then we are justified, conventionally, in believing it to be true.

Another reason for some philosophers being skeptical about historical knowledge is their observation that when historians interpret evidence it is they who give it meaning according to their personal ideas and interests. Consequently the accounts they give of the evidence are simply their mental constructions, and bear no particular relationship to the past at all. Suppose the evidence is some hieroglyphic marks on a stone. To a layperson they might mean nothing; an archaeologist might suspect they constitute a language of some kind; and an expert who knows that language might know what they mean. It is clear that the meaning is supplied by the historian. On this basis Hans Kellner concludes: "his-

59. Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 28.

60. *Ibid.*, 61.

tory is not ‘about’ the past as such, but rather about our ways of creating meanings from the scattered, and profoundly meaning<sup>less</sup> debris we find around us.”<sup>61</sup> He says that any claim by historians to represent reality on the authority of documentary sources must be seen as “essentially rhetorical in character.”<sup>62</sup>

According to Munslow, Hayden White makes a similar point. As Munslow puts it: “History, as opposed to the past, is a literary creation because it is always interpreted through textualised relics which themselves are only to be understood through layers of interpretation as the historian’s facts.”<sup>63</sup> He adds later on: “The real problem with historical evidence for White is not Barthes’s unending round-about of meanings, but the inevitable ideological dimension to the interpretation of evidence.”<sup>64</sup>

Certainly the meaning historians find in data depends upon their general knowledge and their interests, but that does not imply that the descriptions of the past they infer from it cannot be true. When historians interpret evidence, they do not give it just any meaning they fancy. If it is a text, then they try to understand what it would have meant in the community in which it was written. This is the first step towards understanding the circumstances that produced it, the history behind the text that they hope to discover. Certainly their interpretation of the text depends upon their knowledge of its language, but knowledge of what past communities meant is normally arrived at from a critical examination of dozens of their texts, and a careful consideration of the most plausible interpretation of their words and symbols.<sup>65</sup> Certainly the translation is into the historian’s language, using concepts often somewhat different in meaning from the original. But critical historians are sensitive to such differences, and normally explain them in offering the translation.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, scholars very familiar with another language do not need to translate it at all, until they come to report their conclusions to their contemporaries. At all events, when historians consider the evidence available to them, they interpret it by seeking its historical significance, that is, the events that gave rise to it. The process is substantially the same as the interpretation of evidence described above. Bloch sums it up well:

the vocabulary of evidence is, in its way, only another form of evidence. It is, no doubt, an extremely valuable one, but, like all evidences, imperfect and hence subject to criticism. Each significant term, each characteristic turn of style becomes a true component of knowledge—but not until it has been placed in its context, related to the usage of the epoch, of the society or of the author; and above all, if it is a survival of ancient date, secured from the ever-present danger of an anachronistic misinterpretation.<sup>67</sup>

61. Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison, Wisc., 1989), 10.

62. *Ibid.*, 10-11. In fact Kellner allows that we can infer some basic facts of history, such as dates of events, and notes that we give them meaning by pointing out relations between them (*ibid.*, 330-332). This, I think, allows too much to the realists, for are not *any* descriptions of the past conceptualizations by the historian?

63. Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 33.

64. *Ibid.*, 63.

65. See McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, chapter 5.

66. See, for example, Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, 163.

67. *Ibid.*, 168.

Ankersmit, convinced that historical descriptions make no particular reference to events in the past, advised that we should stop worrying about the relation between historiography and the past, and attend to the text alone. He wrote:

The transition from the past itself to the text of the historian, ought to be carefully excluded from all consideration in historiography and all attention of the historiographer must be devoted to the historical text and to what happens between the text and its reader(s). Hence, for reasons of (historiographical) methodology we must deal with the text as if we could not see through it to a past lying behind or below it and thus be able to comment on the adequacy of the account of the past presented in it. From the historiographer's point of view the text must be regarded as a thing—as a literary artifact, to quote White—and not as a textual mimesis of the past.<sup>68</sup>

Skeptics emphasize that every historical description is created by historians, and they assume that as their creation, such descriptions cannot be thought to represent real events. (Leon Goldstein was the first to argue this.) The consequence is plain. As Lawrence Stone remarked: “if there is nothing outside the text, then history as we have known it collapses altogether, and fact and fiction become indistinguishable from one another.”<sup>69</sup>

Ankersmit's refusal to consider historical interpretations as rationally justified by detailed knowledge of the past, which has itself been rationally inferred from observable data, is thus absolute (prior to 1995). But it is unwarranted. Certainly historical descriptions use concepts familiar to the historian, rest upon assumptions about the world and about standards of rationality derived from the historian's culture, and upon the interests of the individual historian. But none of these prevent historians from justifying the claim that their descriptions of the past deserve to be believed to be true, in the sense stated above.

## VI. THE HISTORIAN'S CULTURAL AND PERSONAL BIAS

Perhaps the most profound reason why some philosophers doubt that bias is avoidable in history is the fact that every historian is a product of his or her culture, and we have seen how in the past this has resulted in massive inadvertent bias in history. The bias has been both in the point of view from which the history has been written, and in the assumptions about the nature of the world which have been brought to it.

Until comparatively recently, Western historiography was generally written from the perspective of white, Christian, upper-middle-class males. The history of people of other races, creeds, socioeconomic status, and genders was overlooked. Also, I suspect the history taught at universities is biased, focusing upon human actions and relationships, rather than upon the natural and social structures which facilitate such actions and relationships. Such history produces lively narratives with characters with whom readers can easily relate. The history of constitutional, legal, economic, and communication structures is much more bor-

68. Ankersmit, “The Origins of Postmodernist Historiography,” 106-107.

69. L. Stone, “History and Post-Modernism,” *Past and Present* 135 (1992), 190. Quoted by Keith Jenkins in his *On “What is History?” From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London, 1995), 27.

ing, yet vital for a true understanding of most social changes. As was said before, historians have a social responsibility to produce fair descriptions and explanations of social change.

It is important to distinguish cultural relativism and cultural bias in history. At any time, a culture's understanding of the natural and social world is limited, and from the vantage point of a later period will seem inadequate in some respects. Thus I suspect that before the work of Marx and Freud historians were not entirely aware of the importance of interests and instincts in unconsciously influencing behavior. In the future historians will probably have greater knowledge of the genetic, medical, and psychiatric causes of behavior than they have at present. As knowledge of human nature and behavior progresses, so historical explanations of past human behavior will change. Furthermore, in different periods historians have paid attention to different aspects of history. David Cannadine, for example, has noted how historical accounts of the Industrial Revolution have varied this century, reflecting the economic interests of different periods. Between 1880 and 1920 historians were interested in the social consequences of the revolution; between the 1930s and 1950s they studied cyclical fluctuations in the economy; from the 1950s to the 1970s they focused upon conditions of economic growth; and since the 1970s their interest has been in conditions that limit economic growth.<sup>70</sup> Thus histories reflect both the understanding and the interests of the historian's age. In this way, histories are relative to the historian's culture.

Cultural bias, on the other hand, is evident in histories that are inadequate even on the basis of what was known in the historian's own day, thanks to a pervasive failure to note all the relevant facts, a failure motivated by some interest that is not personal but widespread in the culture. When the bias is culture-wide, we tend not to blame historians who share it, whereas we certainly are inclined to blame them for personal bias. Nevertheless it is bias just the same, and the history profession should be constantly alert for such bias and try to prevent it. In recent decades, many cultural biases have been detected, particularly those to do with gender, race, social class, and imperial aggrandizement. The current bias against analysis of the structures that limit and direct historical change to such a great extent has also become apparent, though a matter of less general concern.

Bias of any sort, be it cultural or personal, is deplorable. If cultural bias is difficult to overcome, personal bias is easier to detect and correct, once the need to provide a fair account of the past is clearly recognized and accepted. A commitment to rationality will help historians overcome personal bias, motivating them to check the adequacy of their preconceptions and descriptions of historical subjects, the scope and intelligibility of their interpretations, and the completeness of their genetic explanations. The search for adequate interpretations and explanations can be limited by a failure of imagination, a failure to see patterns in events, or to imagine possible causes at work, and that failure is sometimes the product of the historian's personal interests. To correct such residual personal

70. David Cannadine, "The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution 1880-1980," *Past and Present* 103 (1984), 131-172.

bias, historians must depend upon their colleagues to point out their inadequacies. As Haskell has said, history should be viewed as a cooperative enterprise, with historians working together to arrive at adequate accounts of the past.<sup>71</sup> The freedom to criticize the views of others is a precious condition for arriving at fair descriptions of the past.

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71. Haskell, "Objectivity is not Neutrality," 134.