

HISTORY EXTENSION

What are the aims and purposes of history?

The aims and purposes of history vary from historian to historian and this is possibly so because, as Jenkins states, history means “different things to different groups”. Post-modernists view history as a grand-narrative, a fabrication of the past through the stories and interpretations of historians. They see that the past and history are completely different things, and rightly so, and that it is virtually impossible to extract past events for today’s time. However, those who view history as a scientific discourse believe that the ‘truth’ may be extracted through thorough research and archival scouring; that although it is a difficult task, such an outcome would be possible with perseverance and methods of deduction. People such as Ranke have strived to find the objective truth by distancing himself from his recordings and studies, but of course, that is virtually an impossible task.

The purposes of history have changed throughout history due to the changing study of history. That is, history is no longer an elitist subject but a universal one. The different approaches to history are reflective of the historian’s context and for whom and why the history is being written. For example, Thucydides recorded details on the Peloponnesian War because of his militaristic background as general and because he wanted to pass down knowledge to the future generations of military leaders. His intentions were purely eunomic and for the purpose of success in war. Even going further back, Herodotus, ‘the father of history’, wrote for the purpose of enjoyment. His histories were written to be shared, enjoyed and spread through time. They were recorded in a conversational and informal manner so that everybody could enjoy it and so that it could be easily remembered. However, as the world evolved and time passed, history has come to be one of the most important subjects. This is so as it provides people with a sense of identity, closure and structure. This is something that was conceived as Ranke as he spread history throughout the world as a scientific and universal subject where anybody anywhere could study it because it is applicable to everyone.

Ranke had an utmost aim of objectivity throughout his work. He wished to study the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. He claimed that historians should stick to the facts and that there should be no evidence of their views and commitments in their writing – that it should be written ‘as it happened’. This is because it is only when they remove all traces of themselves that they can revolve the past. A number of writers have understood this concept as an endorsement of ‘colourless’ history. Ranke has in fact published in the preface of his Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations: “To history has been given the function of judging the past, of instructing men for the profit of future years. The present attempt does not aspire to such a lofty undertaking. It merely wants to show how, essentially, things happened” – thus reflective of and supporting his aim.

Ranke’s impact was on the craft of history and the ideas on how history should be written. He disapproved at the state of historical writing and argued that it relied too much on tradition and believed a more objective history was required to uncover facts. Ranke believed that the purpose of historians should be to reconstruct the uniqueness of periods of the past; that the aim was not to judge the past, but to simply present it and its values in all its uniqueness so that the readers of these histories can come to a conclusion themselves.

Ranke also aimed to understand the nature of historical phenomena, such as an institution or an idea, within its own historical context. This was because they had to be understood on their own terms and therefore can only be succeeded by assessing it in a manner appropriate for that time. He has done so by writing about the transnational and political history during his time, analysing the complex political and religious systems of Europe.

Although Ranke favoured objectivity, like every other historian, subjectivity was undeniable. This is so because whether the historian likes it or not, their own personal, social and political context

would seep into their works. Ranke perhaps saw it necessary that a historian should be as impersonal from his writing as possible and write it 'as it happened' because, as a child of the Enlightenment, saw history as a scientific subject and therefore possible to extract the 'truth' from the past. However, his Lutheran background and position as a monarchist proved him wrong. These ideas were prevalent throughout his works as he declared to reveal what was at God's hand. He made various spiritual contributions throughout his work. Ranke's deeply religious Lutheran beliefs influenced him to believe that God could not be "pigeon-holed" and that his presence could be found in past and present events: "In all history, God dwells, lives and is to be found". His strong monarchist background also affected him as most of his books were written about politics and militaristic affairs. Ranke wrote about transnational and political history which not only covered the bigger powers such as Germany, England and France, but also included smaller states such as Serbia and Belgium. Although he branched out in terms of a variety of countries, he still primarily focused on analysing the complex religious and political systems of Europe. But again, although he was diverse in terms of geography, Ranke was not broad in terms of social class. His upper class background inclined him to focus on political events and individuals as he considered them significant and thus, lower classes were overlooked.

A historian's purpose is ultimately likely to be reflected in every aspect of their work: their subject matter, selection and use of sources of imposition of a particular standard of the 'truth'. Elton differed from Ranke in that he saw history as a circular, not linear progression and believed in the use of narratives to transcend the barrier of time. He believes that the 'cure' for the inevitable difficulties facing historians over the partial nature of evidence and allegation of subjectivity lie in the proper practice of scholarship and research. He was a defender of traditional, scholarly narrative history, much to the demise of other historians. Although he, like Ranke, believed in the objective truth, they differed because Elton saw narratives as important in understanding the past.

Elton sought to seek the past, working backwards from effects to causes. He sought to explain the "power relations within social formation". He believed that knowledge about societies are passed and carried down history. He saw history as not the result of social structures, objective forces or linguistic discourses, but of autonomous human agents. Elton was above all concerned to assert the responsibility of those who study the past to acknowledge its humanity. He stated that "at every moment in the past the future was essentially unpredictable and subject to human choice lies at the heart of a study which respects the past and allows it a life of its own".

Although subjectivity is a big issue in history, Elton argued that it is the human capacity to exercise reason and thought which enables us to transcend context, to change things and to make history. He does not deny or agree that the process of uncovering the absolute truth is possible because he believes in committing and applying one's self to one's work. His conservative approach to history is probably due to his close relations and participation in World War II. Elton believed that historians are human and there is biased and subjective history and that the process of historical research should not be a matter of selecting facts to prove a thesis or an argument but the reconstruction of a real past peopled by real individuals who did things that actually happened.

Elton believed that history should be written for the world through the opinions of people as they are the ones who shape and interpret history. He presented the Protestant Reformation as an example where a historical focal point had been fabricated out of human actions and responses. He stated that although the Church was unstable, its priests were corrupt and that the Enlightenment was approaching, it was ultimately people like Luther and King Henry VIII who shaped our history. He states that the role of history is that they define who we are as they have been created, interpreted and recorded by people just like us. Elton also saw history as an exercise in reason whose purpose is to enlarge the area of individual experience by teaching about human behaviour.

He saw one of its aims as to "teach you to think more deeply, more completely, and on the basis of an enormously enlarged personal experience, about what it may be possible or desirable to do now ..."

The aims and purposes of history are complex and differ from one historian to the next. Most of the time, it is to understand and record the events of the past but people, such as post-modernists, see this as a virtually impossible task. However, within these wide goals, understanding human emotions, actions and how they have impacted both their time and future times are also prevalent.