

To what extent is 'History' an evolving discipline?

The practice of history is an evolving discipline to the extent that the aims and forms it is communicated through constantly change according to contextual values and influences. Mortimer asserts that while academic monographs remain valid forms of communicating history, it is but a 'starting point' to adopt new forms of literature to further engage with the past and present to 'enrich people's lives' by making meaningful statements about humanity. This is true in the evolution of history and its purposes and forms, where **Leopold von Ranke** had very different aims and mediums to **Simon Schama** and more modern historians such as **Ludmilla Jordanova** and **Jack Dougherty**. Through analysis of these historians, it is evident that while history evolves to a large extent, as it ultimately centres around answering new questions through different forms as well as attempting to answer them in meaningful ways that evolve with the context.

Von Ranke's methodologies and purposes exemplify, to a significant extent, what Mortimer refers to as the 'starting point' of the evolving historical discipline, constructing academic monographs, maintaining the only appropriate method of constructing history was to tell it 'as it was'. This he attempts to accomplish through the proper treatment of evidence, most preferably archival, primary sources and documents, so historians can arrive at valid, objective conclusions about the truth of the time, without imagined embellishments. Indeed von Ranke's methodology was heavily influenced by his context, where the German historians challenging the enlightenment rejection of empirical evidence, caused von Ranke to stress role of research to grant history scientific legitimacy. To achieve this contextual purpose, von Ranke excluded the 'literary techniques' that Mortimer suggests the use of. As the importance of objectivity and hard evidence was stressed, von Ranke resorted to the use of official documents that were, by their nature, subjective, thus von Ranke's historical method was heavily shaped by his context. This is evident as the archives were controlled by political figures, where von Ranke's access to them was from diplomats producing documents saved by the government because it was considered as needed for future reference by them. Notably this neglects the elements of history that hold 'cultural value' and fails to 'engage the nation' as von Ranke's histories focus on the political, his sources coming from the perspective of civil servants who are isolated from mainstream thought. Von Ranke claims his purpose lies in not judging the past to instruct the present, which is a purpose that has evolved since, as evident in Mortimer's contemporary assertion that history should allow readers to make their own opinions about the 'resilience of humanity'.

To a large extent there has been an evolution away from telling histories through academic monographs and into other literary forms, which is demonstrated through Schama, who balances the use of academic standards, but extrapolates from that through the use of his imagination, a method endorsed by Mortimer. This evolution is demonstrated by his work of historical fiction *Dead Certainties (1991)* where he utilises narrative to make history more accessible to people outside of academia, 'democratising knowledge', using flawed narrators and interior monologues and historical characters that, according to Wood, lack verisimilitude in terms of having access to privileged information someone in their position could not have. However, Schama's writing, with his offering of multiple accounts, is reflective of his somewhat postmodernist belief that it may well be impossible to put historical events entirely back together once they have been shattered into uncertainties by unreliable witnesses and interested interpreters. Indeed, while Schama has accepted that while it was possible readers could believe it was a work of non-fiction, he himself classifies it as fictional. Furthermore, his work is built around historical evidence from the Massachusetts Historical Society archives, elucidating Schama's balance of both narrative and academic approaches where his imagination is restricted within the bounds of evidence, and thus has not devolved too far from the academic discipline. Thus Schama's new form of presenting history in fact, through its use of literary techniques, makes it more 'readable' and accessible to a wider audience, including not only the academics that previous histories were directed at, but also the public, changing to accomplish the engagement of the nation, which Mortimer views as the purpose of history. Thus history has evolved to a significant extent away from the academic monograph, but maintains its grounds in evidence.

History has thus evolved to the point where it is constructed to for the purpose of being for the wider public, in the form of assigning places such as memorials with cultural value that influence people's understandings of society. As history moves into the public domain in the form of museums and memorials, it also becomes, as Jordanova suggests, a 'tool of establishments', which, while engaging the nation, may also be disseminating 'meaningful statements' that are heavily biased. Indeed Jordanova condemns memorial sites as

not being able to be critical of those they commemorate, presenting a positive image constructed to celebrate events of public or government interest. Despite this, locations of public history provides a new form for paying respect to those who lost their lives in wars in that it is a location or object for mourning the public is allowed to engage with. Interestingly, the political ramifications of public histories, in that they are often funded and commissioned by governments, is similar to the effects of the monarchy on von Ranke, both resulting in a loss of a measure of intellectual freedom in that interpretations need to convey the views of those who fund and facilitate the making of their histories. This is exemplified by the cancelling of the Enola Gay exhibition that encouraged a critical perspective of the event, and potentially ‘change people’s understandings’, but was cancelled as it did not espouse the government-accepted view. Thus, to an extent, the flaws in the discipline of history, namely its subjectivity, has been unchanged since von Ranke’s time.

Source The historical discipline has, in more recent years, evolved to a large extent, to address the issues of the lack of transparency in the construction of history through the new and innovative form of digital history. This ‘engagement of the nation’ is exemplified through Dougherty’s digital book ‘Writing History in the Digital Age’ which encourages public engagement in not only the consumption of the history, but also its construction through web technology that allows ‘open access’ to readers. This is reflective of the increasing democratisation of history that encourages outreach and the creation of an ‘inclusive community of knowledge’. The discipline of history could have only evolved to this stage with the existence of new technologies and the rapid growth of computer literacy in the 21st century, where there is a stark move away from closed, academic histories in its allowance of people with no qualifications to contribute cultural and familial expectations rather than hard evidence. Indeed academic historians are said to take on an ‘advisory role’, especially in circumstances where historical truth and integrity may be compromised by its nature as a ‘collection of social meanings’, resulting in the necessity of the imposition of certain criteria to be met, a possible, but generally positively viewed, restriction on its democratic nature, lest it change to become, as Gardner suggests, for the ‘rearrangement of facts for present purposes, and become devoid of true, historical meaning’.

Thus the study of histories from varying contextual backgrounds has revealed that while the discipline of history has definitely changed to a great extent, the nature of its evolution as progression forward is debatable due to the undermining of historical objectivity and truth through the inherent impact of historical context, the inclusion of narrative, political influences and the allowance of the unqualified to contribute knowledge.