

# Some Reflections on Objectivity and Selectivity in Historical Inquiry

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*(Seward C. Staley Address)*

One cannot reflect long upon the question of truth in historical inquiry without coming to grips with a most important problem — that of objectivity. As Sidney Hook says: “To the extent that dignity and honesty in the conduct of human affairs rest on the belief in such objectivity, reflection upon it goes to the heart of the question concerning the nature and possibility of liberal civilization.” Can the writing of history be objective? Is truth about the past attainable? Does the necessary method of reconstruction preclude objectivity? Does not the fact that history is constantly being rewritten support the assumption of the subjectivists that objectivity is impossible? Does selectivity preclude objectivity? Can the historian escape personal bias? Ever since 1821, when von Humboldt, reading a paper “On the Historian’s Task” to the Prussian Academy, discussed the nature of past actuality, a definite philosophic split has occurred among practicing historians and philosophers. The difference became the focal point of much epistemological debate between those espousing the scientific method and those espousing the historical method. Among the latter, two major positions can be identified as that of the subjectivists and that of the objectivists.

Numerous writers have stated the essence of the subjectivists’ position. Benedette Croce assumed history was a creation of an individual spirit. Beard believed the historian cannot separate his own personality from the age in which he lives — he performs an act of faith. Becker believed that the past is gone and the world of history is an intangible recreated world. Walsh believed that individual creativity was a barrier to objectivity. Aron stressed that the historians’ values as “center of interests” — values which have no universal validity precludes objectivity. Collingwood emphasized imagination in writing history since history was a re-enactment of past thought.

The objectivists position has been espoused by many. von Ranke felt that history wants to show what actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*). To him, history could be achieved in finding, reporting, and arranging all the documents on the theme and then by repeating what the documents say happened. Ratner believes that the historian must “formulate his postulates rigorously, construct and consider alternative postulates-sets critically yet sympathetically, and foreswear identification of the familiar with the true. White felt that the historian’s task remains that of presenting a briefer list (from an enormous one ideally constituting history) — one that is representative of the enormous list. Nagel indicated that it never was the task of the historian to reproduce its subject matter. He felt that unless selectivity was used, the historian’s task would never be resolved satisfactorily. Hook believes the crucial question to be whether the account does justice to the available evidence by means of a method and criteria of relevance.

What are some approaches to historical inquiry developed to help secure greater objectivity? The perspective approach to history, as suggested by Mannheim, recognizes two factors, the evidence which the historian must accept, and his point of view, i.e., his subjective element in interpretation. This approach holds that there are many perspectives on the same object and that the historian is influenced by his milieu to select

one of them in developing his interpretation. The main point to make here is that objectivity in the writing of history, according to the perspective theory, is possible in only a limited and perhaps weakened sense. This theory would not support questions about different points of view in history. The correspondence theory of truth in the writing of history, as used by Mandelbaum, would say that an account is true because it corresponds with the facts, i.e., it “ ‘concorde’ with the fact with which it purports to deal.” The “principle of non-vacuous contrast” was suggested by Blake in describing an attempt to achieve greater objectivity. If history cannot be objective because facts must be selected, then history will never be objective. This argument violates the principle of non-vacuous contrast. Believing that the term black would have no meaning unless there were something white, Blake concludes that when the subjectivist asserts that all history is subjective, the statement has no meaning unless one assumes that some history is objective. The “ideal observer” approach probably stems from the “moral sense theory” and essentially includes the concept that the observer can be identified as a standard for evaluation or comparison. The characteristics for an ideal observer would be the same for the “ideal historian.” The theory of an objective historical consciousness has been suggested as an alternate to the perspective theory already mentioned. It hopes for a single historical viewpoint based upon a set of “presuppositions” which all historians would accept and which would help develop a historical “consciousness in general,” i.e., a standard way of thinking about history.

In the special field of sport history, there have recently been attempts to achieve objectivity by the use of models emanating particularly from the social sciences. Some sport historians are attempting to use such techniques as game theory, the theory of conflict resolution, role analysis, and econometrics. In efforts primarily directed toward depth of meaning, toward the “why,” toward an understanding of the history of sport, Metcalf, Glassford, Lindsey, and Moriarty have done significant work. Specifically, Metcalf used the Marxian model based upon the materialistic concept of history to place Canadian sport in a social and economic context. In discussing the place of sport in the “life style” of mid-nineteenth-century Canadians, Glassford used the Parsonian structural functionalism model as adapted by Loomis. Lindsey used Berkofer’s behavioral approach model in trying to understand the contributions of W. George Beers. Moriarty’s molar research model for organizational history was discussed as a technique to describe those questions which pertain to organizations. Watkins suggested an “ideal type model,” which he thought held some potential in historical research.