
UNIT 3 OBJECTIVITY AND INTERPRETATION

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

The principle of objectivity has been the most important principle of the Western historiography over the ages. In fact, it is the foundation on which the edifice of historical profession stands. In the Western world, the historians since the early ages have believed that their writings about the past are true and objective. This belief was challenged by many philosophers and thinkers who said that the quest for objectivity was futile. However, the mainstream of historiography remained stuck to the notion of objectivity. In the words of Peter Novick, an American historian and a radical critic of the principle of objectivity, it was 'the rock on which the (historical) venture was constituted, its continuing *raison d'être*.' Most, if not all, historians wrote in the belief that their writings presented an objective picture of the world. Even when they disagreed among themselves, they believed that their accounts were more objective than those of others whom they criticised. Thus the historical battles were fought on the grounds of objectivity. However, it is since the 1970s that the notion of objectivity faced its most serious challenge. Now it has become rather difficult to forcefully assert that objectivity is possible to achieve in the writing of history. In fact, some of the critics of objectivity even doubt whether it is desirable to achieve it. The controversy has become really bitter, even though most of the functioning historians still go about their work believing in the possibility of presenting a true account of the past. This Unit will acquaint you with many sides of this controversy.

3.2 WHAT IS OBJECTIVITY?

Objectivity has been the founding principle of the historiographical tradition in the West. Right since the days of Herodotus, the historians have believed in the separation of the subject and the object, in the distinction between the knower and known and in the possibility to recover the past. Peter Novick, a critic of the principle of objectivity, has clearly defined it in the following words:

‘The principal elements of the ideal of [objectivity] are well known and can be briefly recapitulated. The assumptions on which it rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to the truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation : the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned. Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are “found”, not “made”. Though successive generations of historians might, as their perspectives shifted, attribute different significance to the events in the past, the meaning of those events was unchanging.’

(Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream : The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge : CUP, 1988, pp. 1-2)

For this purpose, however, the historian has to be impartial and should not take sides. He/she should be able to suspend his/her personal beliefs and rely only on the truth of the evidences. In the words of Peter Novick :

‘The objective historian’s role is that of a neutral, or disinterested, judge; it must never degenerate into that of an advocate or, even worse, propagandist. The historian’s conclusions are expected to display the standard judicial qualities of balance and evenhandedness. As with the judiciary, these qualities are guarded by the insulation of the historical profession from social pressures or political influence, and by the individual historian avoiding partisanship or bias—not having any investment in arriving at one conclusion rather than another. Objectivity is held to be at grave risk when history is written for utilitarian purposes. One corollary of all this is that historians, as historians, must purge themselves of external loyalties : the historian’s primary allegiance is to “the objective historical truth”, and to professional colleagues who share a commitment to cooperative, cumulative efforts to advance toward that goal.”

Thomas Haskell, a historian, has questioned this conflation of objectivity and neutrality. In his article ‘Objectivity is not Neutrality’, he has argued that objectivity and neutrality are two different things, even though in most of nineteenth-century historiography they were equated with each other. Now, ‘among the influential members of the historical profession the term has long since lost whatever connection it may once have had with passionlessness, indifference, and neutrality’. He cites the cases of historians, particularly, Eugene Genovese, the American historian on slavery, whose history is objective, though not neutral. Haskell further clarifies his position :

‘My conception of objectivity ... is compatible with strong political commitment. It pays no premium for standing in the middle of the road, and it recognizes that scholars are as passionate and as likely to be driven by interest as those they write about. It does not value even detachment as an end in itself, but only as an indispensable prelude or preparation for the achievement of higher levels of understanding’

We, therefore, now have two somewhat differing perceptions of objectivity, so far as its relation with neutrality is concerned. However, in other areas such as objectivity’s position as the founding principle of the historical profession, its distance from propaganda and from wishful thinking, its reliance on evidence and logic, and its requirement for a minimum level of detachment are common to all its definitions.

5.2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRINCIPLE OF OBJECTIVITY

The belief that there is a reality of the past and it is possible to historically capture it has been engrained in the dominant tradition of the Western historiography. The mainstream historiography in the Western world since the time of Herodotus maintained that the historical records referred to a real past and real human beings. The objectivist tradition believed in both the reality of the past as well as in the possibility of its mirror representation. It maintained that there was a correspondence between the intentions and actions of the people and the historians should exert themselves to comprehend the mental world of the people in the past.

The development of modern science added a new dimension to this belief. It was now asserted that the methods used in the sciences could be applicable to various branches of human knowledge. The Positivists asserted this claim most strongly, even as it developed as a common belief in the nineteenth century. August Comte, the founder of Positivism, believed that the inductive method used in the natural sciences needed to be applied to the history as well as the humanities in general. He also claimed scientific status for the humanities. He thought that all societies operated through certain general laws which needed to be discovered. According to him, all societies historically passed through three stages of development. These stages were :

- i) The 'theological' or fictitious stage, during which the human mind was in its infancy and the natural phenomena were explained as the results of divine or supernatural powers.
- ii) The 'metaphysical' or abstract stage is transitional in the course of which the human mind passes through its adolescence. In this stage, the processes of nature were explained as arising from occult powers.
- iii) The 'Positive' stage which witnessed the maturity of human mind and the perfection of human knowledge. Now there was no longer a search for the causes of the natural phenomena but a quest for the discovery of their laws. Observation, reasoning and experimentation were the means to achieve this knowledge. This was the scientific age which is the final stage in the development of human societies as well as human minds.

The followers of Comte, also known as the Positivists, time and again asserted the existence of universal laws applicable to all societies and all branches of human knowledge.

However, it was another tradition which laid the foundation of objectivist history in the nineteenth century. It was the tradition starting with Niebuhr and Ranke in Germany. Although it was Niebuhr who first introduced the critical method in writing of history, it was Ranke who truly and elaborately laid the foundation of a genuinely 'objective' historiography. He clearly distinguished history from literature and philosophy. By doing so, he attempted to rid it of an overdose of imagination and metaphysical speculation. For him, the historians' job was to investigate the past on its own terms and to show to the readers 'how it essentially was'. It did not mean, however, that Ranke had a blind faith in the records. He, in fact, wanted the historians to subject the sources to strict examination and look for their internal consistency so as to determine whether they were genuine or later additions. He wanted the historians to critically examine and verify all the sources before reposing their trust in them.

But, once it was proved that the records were genuine and belonged to the age which the historian was studying, the historian may put complete faith in them. He called these records as 'primary sources' and maintained that these sources would provide the

foundations for a true representation of the contemporary period. Thus the historians should trust the archival records more than the printed ones which might be biased. He, however, believed that it was possible to reconstruct the past and that objectivity was attainable.

This trend emphasised that the facts were in the records which the historians needed to discover. If the historians were impartial, followed a proper scientific method and removed his / her personality from the process of investigation, it was possible to reconstruct the past from these facts. There was an enormous belief in the facts in the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries. It was thought that once all the facts were known, it was possible to write 'ultimate history' which could not be superseded. As Lord Acton, the Regius Professor of History and the editor of the first edition of the *Cambridge Modern History*, said :

'Ultimate history we cannot have in this generation; but we can dispose of conventional history, and show the point we have reached on the road from one to the other, now that all information is within reach, and every problem has become capable of solution.'

This confidence in being able to get hold of all the sources and to write 'ultimate history', even though at a future date, was reflected in his belief to achieve complete objectivity which would transcend nationality, language and religion. Therefore, in his instructions to the contributors to the volumes of the *Cambridge Modern History*, he wrote :

'Contributors will understand that our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, German and Dutch alike; that nobody can tell, without examining the list of authors, where the Bishop of Oxford laid down the pen and whether Fairburn or Gasquet, Libermann or Harrison took it up.'

This belief in possibility of uncovering all the sources and thus writing 'ultimate history' was asserted in an extremely popular text book in historical method by French historians, Langlois and Seignobos :

'When all the documents are known, and have gone through the operations which fit them for use, the work of critical scholarship will be finished. In the case of some ancient periods, for which documents are rare, we can now see that in generation or two it will be time to stop.'

The scientific status of history was forcefully asserted by J.B.Bury, Acton's successor to the Regius Chair at Cambridge. He believed that although history 'may supply material for literary art or philosophical speculation, she is herself simply a science, no less and no more'.

Even George Clark, in his general introduction to the second *Cambridge Modern History*, though he did not believe in the possibility of writing 'ultimate history', made a distinction between the 'hard core of facts' and the 'surrounding pulp of disputable interpretation'.

It is evident that in such thinking interpretation had very little role to play. The writing of history was simply related to the documents. It did not matter who the historian was as long as verified documents for the period were available. In this view, as E.H.Carr put it :

'History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are available to historians in documents, inscriptions and so on, like fish in the fishmonger's slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him.'

But even before the nineteenth century ended, such beliefs started to look implausible. Application of some new techniques in archaeology and other areas uncovered ever-increasing information even about most ancient societies. Moreover, in the beginning of the twentieth century, historiography moved to other directions away from political history which the nineteenth-century historians specialised in. Social, economic and cultural histories began to be written. The historians started to look at already available documents from new perspectives and for different purposes. It was also pointed out that the works of even those historians, including Ranke, who believed in complete objectivity and professed the use of 'primary sources' were full of rhetorical elements and were many times based on printed 'secondary sources'.

The Rankean tradition was criticised in the twentieth century for being too naïve and being concerned with individual facts instead of the general patterns. Moreover, it was also criticised for being narrowly political and being concerned with elite individuals. The new trends in the historiography in the twentieth century focused on economy and society as opposed to the political and on common people as opposed to the elite. The most influential among these trends were the Marxist and the *Annales* schools of historiography. However, they shared with the Rankean tradition two fundamental themes. They believed that history could be written scientifically and objectively and that there was a direction in which the history was moving continuously.

However, the scientific and objectivist claims of historiography suffered somewhat between the wars. The records and facts were blatantly manipulated by various national political establishments. The continued tension led to partisan assertions both by various governments and respective intelligentsia. History-writing was also affected by this. After the Second World War, the Cold War also influenced the academia and prompted the intellectuals to take sides or, conversely, to hide their opinions to avoid repression.

But most of functioning historians retained their faith in the possibility of achieving objectivity in history. The proponents of objectivity from Ranke in the 1820s to Robert Fogel in the 1970s believed in the scientific status of history. They thought that if proper scientific methods of inquiry were used, it could be possible to get close to what really happened in the past. It was also necessary for them to make a sharp division between history and literature.

3.4 CRITIQUES OF OBJECTIVITY

By the late twentieth century the confidence in the objectivity and scientificity of history faced increasingly radical challenges. Anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss denied that the modern western civilisation, based on rationality and science, was in any way superior to the pre-modern, or even 'savage', communities so far as successfully coping with life is concerned. At another level, many historians and theorists of history began to think that history was closer to literature than to science. Moreover, the new linguistic theories starting with Saussure strongly professed that the role of language is not to refer to reality but to construct reality. Thus the world which is conveyed to us through language is not the real world. Similarly, the historians' accounts of the past does not refer to the real past, but to the world imagined by the historians. History, therefore, is the story told by the historian. In the words of Louis Mink, an American philosopher of history, 'Stories are not lived but told.' Mink further argued that life 'has no beginnings, middles or ends'. Such sequences belong only to stories as well as to history. And, therefore, history is much like the story.

Although they are related in certain ways, there are broadly three lines of criticism on the notion of historical objectivity: constraints of evidence and individual bias, cultural relativism and postmodern and linguistic turn.

3.4.1 Constraints of Evidence and Individual Bias

Ironically, it was Kant, the great German philosopher influenced by the ideas of Enlightenment, who propounded the ideas which were taken up by Dilthey, Croce, Collingwood and Oakeshott for criticising the philosophical quest that the human world could be comprehended in the same way as the natural world. Kant's formulation that there was a separation between the real world and the subject trying to make sense of it led to the idea that it was not possible to reconstruct the reality and that the correspondence theory of truth was not valid. This view was developed later to challenge the notion that history could be like science. It was, however, the tradition of philosophical thinking that followed Nietzsche which posed a more serious challenge to objectivist historiography.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), a German philosopher, clearly demarcated between scientific knowledge and cultural knowledge. In his book, entitled *Introduction to Historical Knowledge* and published in 1883, and in some later articles, he differentiated between science and history on the basis of their different fields of research, different experiences and different attitudes of the researchers. According to him, while the scientist was external to the reality in nature, the historian was involved in the process of constructing reality. Thus, unlike the scientist, the historian could not be just an observer. It is, therefore, impossible to achieve objectivity in history-writing.

Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), the Italian historian and thinker, followed Dilthey in the belief that there is a fundamental distinction between science and history. According to him, the past exists only through the mind of the historian. He declared that 'all history is contemporary history'. It was, however, R.G. Collingwood (1889-1943), a British historian and philosopher, who provided a detailed exposition of this line of criticism. In his posthumously published book, *The Idea of History*, Collingwood elaborated his idea of historical relativism. He believed that 'the past simply as past is wholly unknowable'. Therefore, the history was not at all about the real past but a creation of the historian. In his opinion, 'historical thinking means nothing else than interpreting all the available evidence with the maximum degree of critical skill. It does not mean discovering what really happened....' Each historian writes his / her own history which may or may not have things in common with others. He wrote:

'St Augustine looked at history from the point of view of the early Christian; Tillamont, from that of a seventeenth-century Frenchman; Gibbon, from that of an eighteenth-century Englishman; Mommsen from that of a nineteenth-century German. There is no point in asking which was the right point of view. Each was the only one possible for the man who adopted it.'

History is, therefore, written by the people who are basically concerned about the present. And there is nothing wrong with it. Collingwood thought that 'since the past in itself is nothing, the knowledge of the past in itself is not, and cannot be, the historian's goal. His goal, as the goal of a thinking being, is knowledge of the present; to that everything must return, round that everything must revolve.'

Thus the present is, and should be, historian's only concern. And since all history is historian's ideas about the past, 'all history is the history of thought'.

E.H. Carr approvingly summarises some of these views. He says that the historians are products of their own times and their mental world is shaped by the ideas and politics of their contemporary world. They are driven by contemporary concerns and their viewing of the past is through the lens of the present. It is, therefore, difficult for them to be objective in the representation of the past. Their researches and presentations are always coloured by their present concerns. Even the evidences they collect do not present the whole picture of the past because they are chosen according to their contemporary

preoccupations and ideological bent. Moreover, even the records which the people in the past bequeathed to us are selective. In Carr's words, 'Our picture has been preselected and predetermined for us, not so much by accident as by people who were consciously or unconsciously imbued with a particular view and thought the facts which supported that view worth preserving.' It is difficult to rely upon the evidences and be complacent about the facts because 'the facts of history never come to us 'pure', since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder.' It is in this light that Carr concludes :

'No documents can tell us more than what the author of the document thought – what he thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or perhaps only what he wanted others to think he thought, or even only what he himself thought he thought.'

Thus there are two levels at which the process of selection goes on : one by the contemporary recorder who decides what is worth recording and second by the historian who further narrows the selection by deciding what is worth presenting. In this opinion, the past, therefore, is doubly constructed for us.

3.4.2 Cultural Relativism

Inspired by the cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, some of the recent historical thinkers have argued that the historians' accounts of the past are coloured by the ideas, concepts and language of their own societies. This means that such narratives are necessarily influenced by the cultural prejudices and social preoccupations of the historians. Since different cultures perceive the world differently, the descriptions of a different society or of the past, which belongs to a different culture, cannot be objective. These descriptions are culturally determined. Thus a solar eclipse may be described variously by people belonging to different societies. Similarly, the death of a king may be attributed to evil spirits, illness or conspiracy by his enemies. Therefore, the history written by the historian is shaped by the concepts and beliefs of his / her own culture. Paul A. Roth has argued in support of this belief that 'There is no warrant for maintaining that there is some static past world which diligent research in the archives ... uncovers.' He, therefore, suggests that it is important to rid 'oneself of a notion of historical truth', because

'past events exist, qua events, only in terms of some historically situated conception of them. The notion of a historical truth for events, that is, a perspective on happenings untainted by human perception and categorisation, proves to be incoherent. There exists a world not of our own making, but any subdivision of it into specific events is our doing, not nature's.'

Moreover, Geertz also derives from the new linguistic theories in his conception of culture as an 'interworked system of construable signs'. In his opinion, culture should be seen as 'an assemblage of texts' which are 'imaginative works built out of social materials'. Even society is 'organised in terms of symbols ... whose meaning ... we must grasp if we are to understand that organisation and formulate its principles.' Thus society and culture become 'texts' whose meanings can be understood only through semiotic codes. He further emphasised the point about the textual nature of society and culture by asserting that 'the real is as imagined as the imaginary'. In such a theoretical framework, any notion of reality, and history, disappears. As Gabrielle Spiegel, an historian of medieval Europe, remarked:

'If the imaginary is real and the real imaginary and there are no epistemological grounds for distinguishing between them, then it is impossible to create an explanatory hierarchy that establishes a causal relationship between history and literature, life and thought, matter and meaning.'

3.4.3 Linguistic and Postmodern Turn

This tradition offers the most radical critique of the possibility of retrieving truth from the past. It considers language, instead of reality, as constitutive of social meaning and human consciousness. It all started with Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, who propounded the theory of structural linguistics. His theories influenced many intellectual movements such as structuralism, semiotics and poststructuralism.

In his book, *Course in General Linguistics*, posthumously published in 1916, Saussure radically questioned the referential function of language. According to him, language is a close autonomous system and words in any language (which may be called 'signifiers') refer to concepts (which may be called 'signified') and not to concrete things in the world. In other words, the language does not refer to real things in the world. It is not a medium to communicate meaning of the world, and the relationship between the language and the world is arbitrary. Language, according to Saussure, creates meaning on its own and human thoughts are constituted by language.

Rolland Barthes, a renowned French linguist and thinker, carried the arguments further. According to him, the claim of the historians to write about the reality of the past is fake. The history written by them is not about the past but 'an inscription on the past pretending to be a likeness of it, a parade of signifiers masquerading as a collection of facts'. According to Barthes, historians' description of the past basically refers to a number of concepts about the past and not the reality of the past. He states that :

'Like any discourse with "realistic" claims, the discourse of history thus believes it knows only a two-term semantic schema, referent and signifier. . . . In other words, in "objective" history, the "real" is never anything but an unformulated signified, sheltered behind the apparent omnipotence of the referent. This situation defines what we might call the *reality effect*.'

Thus Barthes considers objectivity as 'the product of what might be called the referential illusion'. This illusion lies in the historians' belief that there is a past world to be discovered through meticulous research. In fact, the past, which the historians refer to, is all their own creation. All the paraphernalia fashioned by the historical profession such as verbatim quotation, footnotes, references, etc. are façade to create a make-believe world which the readers may consider real. In fact, Barthes says, these are the devices to produce the 'reality effect' which may persuade the readers to believe in the world created by the historian.

The most radical challenge to history-writing came from the theory of deconstruction developed by Jacques Derrida. It completely denied the possibility of human beings to comprehend reality outside the language-system of which they are a part. And the language does not refer to an external reality but is a self-contained system which has no relationship to reality. Even the author has no role to play in determining the meaning of the text. Moreover, the language itself has no logical and coherent pattern. Derrida considered language as a system of arbitrary codification without any fixed meaning. Thus the text contains several meanings which may be at variance with each other. Derrida states that a text

'is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far.'

Therefore, Derrida proposes the use of 'deconstruction' to reveal the hidden meanings in a text. However, deconstruction ultimately does not bring out any meaning from the

text. It only shows the incapacity of language to refer to any reality outside its own boundaries. In Derrida's difficult prose, this process is explained:

'Through this sequence of supplements a necessity is announced: that of an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of original perception.'

Gabrielle Spiegel, an historian of medieval period, critically puts Derrida's position in slightly simpler language as follows:

'Behind the language of the text stands only more language, more texts, in an infinite regress in which the presence of the real and the material is always deferred, never attainable. According to deconstruction, we are confined within a "prison house of language" (to use the fashionable Nietzschean phrase) from which there is no exit. ...'

If the words in the language cannot refer to any external reality, if the language has no fixed meaning and if the text contains infinite meanings, how it is possible to write history objectively. It is precisely this that the deconstructionists are trying to attack. As Richard Evans points out:

'They imply that authors can no longer be regarded as having control over the meaning of what they write. In the infinite play of signification that constitutes language. The meaning of a text changes every time it is read. Meaning is put into it by the reader, and all meanings are in principle equally valid. In history, meaning cannot be found in the past; it is merely put there, each time differently, and with equal validity, by different historians. There is no necessary or consistent relation between the text of history and the texts of historians. The texts which survive from the past are as arbitrary in their signification as any other texts, and so too are texts which use them.'

Other historians have also expressed their apprehensions regarding dissolution of meaning. Thus Lawrence Stone remarked that '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'. Gabrielle Spiegel also expressed her concern that 'if texts – documents, literary works, whatever – do not transparently reflect reality, but only other texts, then historical study can scarcely be distinguished from literary study, and the "past" dissolves into literature'.

These apprehensions were not wide of the mark as was proved by the works of Louis Mink, a philosopher of history, and Hayden White, an American historian and theorist. Mink spoke about an internal contradiction in history-writing;

'So we have a ... dilemma about the historical narrative: as historical it claims to represent, through its form, part of the real complexity of the past, but as narrative it is a product of imaginative construction, which cannot defend its claim to truth by any accepted procedure of argumentation or authentication.'

Hayden White is more extreme in considering that the historical narrative cannot lay any claim to truth and it should be considered as a form of fiction. In many books and articles, White argues that there is no difference between history and fiction. In his view, historical writings are 'verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in sciences'.

Closely allied with this is the postmodernist position which considers that modern historiography is too closely related to western imperialist expansion to be impartial. It has all along justified the notion of the superiority of modern Europe over other peoples and cultures. Therefore, its claims to objectivity and impartiality are suspect.

3.5 HISTORIAN'S CONCERN

In the recent past many historians have started expressing concern about this total denial of the possibility of achieving objectivity. Lawrence Stone, a British-American historian, stated it clearly as follows :

‘During the last twenty-five years, the subject-matter of history – that is events and behaviour – and the problem – that is explanation of change over time – have all been brought seriously into question, thus throwing the profession, more especially in France and America, into a crisis of self-confidence about what it is doing and how it is doing it.’

According to Stone, these threats to historical profession came from three different sources which were related – the theory of deconstruction developed by Jacques Derrida, cultural anthropology enunciated by Clifford Geertz and the New Historicism.

Another historian, Gabrielle Spiegel, is equally concerned about this development. She outlines the process thus :

‘... the paradigms that have governed historical and literary study since the nineteenth century no longer hold unquestioned sway. The confident, humanist belief that a rational, “objective” investigation of the past permits us to recover “authentic” meanings in the historical texts has come under severe attack in postmodernist critical debate. At stake in this debate are a number of concepts traditionally deployed by historians in their attempts to understand the past : causality, change, authorial intent, stability of meaning, human agency and social determination.’

Based on this observation, she concludes that ‘Looking at the current critical climate from the vantage point of a historian, the dominant impression one takes away is that of the dissolution of history, of a flight from “reality” to language as the constitutive agent of human consciousness and the social production of meaning.’

These are not misplaced concerns. The postmodernists also think the same way that their theories would lead to the withering of history. Keith Jenkins, a postmodern thinker, proclaims the demise of both the ‘upper and lower case histories’. He says that ‘history now appears to be just one more foundationless, positioned expression in a world of foundationless, positioned expressions’.

Even before that, Peter Novick, concluded his famous book by stating that ‘As a broad community of discourse, as a community of scholars united by common aims, common standards and common purposes, the discipline of history had ceased to exist’.

Patrick Joyce, another adherent to this idea, proclaims the ‘end of history’ because ‘social history is the child of modernity’ which does not engage in the process of ‘innocently naming the world but creating it in its own political and intellectual image’.

Even in the field of Indian history, this concern is now increasingly evident. Many historians have reacted against the postmodernist tilt of the later subaltern studies. Prominent among such historians are Sumit Sarkar, Rosalind O’Hanlon, C.A. Bayly, Ranajit Das Gupta and David Washbrook. They have questioned the shift towards culturalism in theme and relativism in approach in Indian studies. We will discuss these issues in detail in Unit 25. Here we will conclude this section by reiterating that the postmodernist intervention in historiography has unsettled the long-lasting notions so far as the philosophy of history is concerned.

3.6 POSSIBILITY OF OBJECTIVITY

Faced with such radical attacks on the possibility of objectivity, one wonders whether it is at all possible to achieve any measure or kind of objectivity, whether it is possible to have any understanding of the past or of different societies and cultures. These critics have made us aware that a simple correspondence theory of truth is not quite reliable. Our knowledge of the world is mediated through our present concerns, ideological commitments, cultural environment, and intellectual atmosphere. The historians also accept that the sources are not unproblematic. They are suffused with levels of subjectivity which are sometimes quite alarming. And, despite our critical evaluation, it is not always possible to do away with the bias in our sources. Similarly, despite our conscious attempts, it is often difficult to annul all culturally induced biases in our own thinking as historians. Most historians now recognise that it is not possible to get a full picture of the past. Sources are varied and their interpretations are innumerable. In such situation any claim to fully represent the past may well be a hollow claim.

However, a total denial of the possibility of objectivity is to stretch the point to another extreme. The fact that total objectivity is not possible does not mean that no objectivity is possible, that any quest for objectivity is useless. Even though it may not be possible to tell the whole truth of the past does not mean that even partial truth cannot be reclaimed. As Noel Carroll, one of the critics of the relativist position, has pointed out :

‘In one sense, historical narratives are inventions, viz., in the sense that they are made by historians; but it is not clear that it follows from this that they are made-up (and are, therefore, fictional).’

He further emphasises this point by stating that :

‘... narratives are a form of representation, and, in that sense, they are invented, but that does not preclude their capacity to provide accurate information. Narratives can provide accurate knowledge about the past in terms of the kinds of features they track, namely, the ingredients of *courses of events*, which include : background conditions, causes and effects, as well as social context, the logic of situations, practical deliberations, and ensuing actions.’

Carroll criticises Hayden White and others for believing that only a mirror-image of the past can satisfy the truth condition for a historical narrative. If it fails to provide a picture image of the past, it will remain at the level of fiction. So, either it is a mirror-image or it is a fiction; there is nothing in between. Many historians have reacted against this view and have appealed for what Brian Fay has called a ‘dialectical middle ground which preserves the insights of each Attitude and prunes each of its excesses’.

3.7 SUMMARY

The principle of objectivity has provided the basis for the writing of history in the Western world since ancient times. That there is a past world beyond human subjectivity led to the attempt to recover it. This endeavour was given a solid foundation in the early nineteenth century by the German historian, Wilhelm Ranke. Several generations of historians followed Ranke and wrote objectivist and empiricist histories. This tradition is still broadly accepted within the historical profession. However, there have been many critiques of this tradition. The most common criticism focused on the inability of the historians to completely abandon their ideological and cultural biases. Moreover, it stressed that the reality of the past was impossible to recover due to bias in the sources. Another type of criticism emphasise that our knowledge of the world is entirely through the language which the historians or others speak and in which they write. Thus, there is no world beyond its linguistic representation. Any kind of objectivity is, therefore, impossible to achieve. These critiques sometimes question the very basis of historiography. Most practicing historians, however, tread a middle ground between the claims of total objectivity and its total denial by some critics.

3.8 EXERCISES

- 1) What is objectivity? Discuss the historiographical traditions which take the principle of objectivity as their basis.
- 2) Why are historians so concerned about the criticism levelled against the principle of objectivity? Do you think objectivity is possible to achieve in history-writing?
- 3) Who were the earliest critics of objectivity in history? What are their arguments? Do you agree with them?
- 4) Write notes on the following :
 - a) Cultural Realism
 - b) Linguistic Turn.

3.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory : Critical Interrogations* (London, MacMillan, 1991).

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