The Function of the Historian in Society

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The public rarely understands what historians do or why they are necessary. We’ve often been asked, “What do you really do?” Inevitably, in the classroom or at a cocktail party, we hear the gibe, “You historians don’t do anything important. You don’t really produce anything. You don’t save lives or contribute to the economy.” However the question is worded or the idea implied, we are often asked what the point is of spending our energies or institution’s money on historical study, teaching, and research, especially about events in the remote past. We also are often asked why anyone should bother learning, much less teaching, special skills only of use to historians, like heuristics or dead languages. “Hasn’t everything been translated already? Isn’t it all just opinion anyway? Does it matter what really happened in the past?”

Such attitudes would be merely annoying if they weren’t so alarming. There is a memorable scene in the film Schindler’s List, in which a Jewish historian is listed as “nonessential” and earmarked for an extermination camp until, passed off by Schindler as an expert polisher of artillery shells, he is saved and put to “useful” work. This example is admittedly extreme. But it hints at the frightening outcome of a society that has abandoned any value for real historians, trading them in for ideologues and pseudohistorians of the type that bolstered Hitler’s Third Reich. This essay will help forestall the naysayers and educate the naive,
who believe historians have little social utility. It is hard to find anything that analyzes and explains, in simple terms, the vital functions a historian fulfills for the healthy society, functions only a skilled historian can fulfill. An approach is needed both expository and normative: describing what historians do, but also what they ought to do, in order to be of use to humankind. Here I shall try to tackle that task, hoping at least to inspire both students and teachers of history to reevaluate the positive roles historians play in our society.

A simple come-back to questions about our alleged uselessness is this: “Is your memory unimportant? Nonessential? A do-nothing? Would you really let anyone carve it out or, worse, transplant whatever memories they wish to put there?” Surely no one but a fool would say yes. A human is a useless cripple without a memory, and can become someone else’s puppet when true memories are replaced with false. Society is no less dependent on maintaining its true memory, on not letting its memory vanish or become manipulated and eclipsed by other’s fantasies, myths, or false memories. A society afflicted with Alzheimers or troubled by a collective psychosis is just as doomed as any individual suffering the same ailments. Historians are the memory cells of the metaphorical “brain” that is the whole human race: it can no more do without them than you can do without the memory cells of your own brain. To function as a society with an accurate memory requires an entire culture of historical study, teaching, and research. Good historians don’t grow on trees. Nor do books spontaneously correct or update themselves. Nor can works of scholarship be interrogated or asked new questions without the efforts of trained historians.

To put it another way, historians are the workhorses of long-term social memory. Some aphorisms will hammer this home, carrying to fruition the analogy of your memory cells and the historian. To know who we are, we have to know who we were: what we used to be, how we got here, and the progress we have made, even the progress we haven’t. We need to know what has and hasn’t worked, what has and hasn’t been tried, if we are to avoid past mistakes, benefit from past successes, and maintain a store of realistic models from which to draw and inspire new innovations and solutions to new problems. By removing the distorting lens of a single culture or time, historians help us to better understand humanity. To know what humans are really and truly capable of, the good and the bad, we need a continuous databank of human behavior, of our heroism, villainy, mediocrity. To know how things get done, and how they fail, the historian sets out to discover and record the most relevant and essential information. Mythology will not serve as a substitute: for to deal with reality, we need to know reality, not fantasies and idealizations.
We want historians to be as truthful with us as we want our own memories to be, perhaps even more so. We cannot do without them.

The problem partly stems from people’s uncertainty whether history is a science or an art. History sits on the border between the sciences and the humanities. Through art, thought, literature, and language, the humanities inform us about ourselves and equip us to better understand and communicate with each other. They educate us in human desires, perceptions, dreams, and nightmares. History does this, too, though in a different way. Through literature we understand fiction and the internal meaning of texts, but through history we understand fact and external cause and effect. Yet history informs the meaning of a text, even a fictional one, while literary analysis assists the historian in sorting fact from fiction and understanding just what past writers were trying to say. Ascertaining historical truth is a science, but interpreting it, and conveying it to society in an intelligible and engaging form is an art. So historians have as much to gain from understanding scientific rationalism as from the literary craft.

There are important differences between history and science. Through science we seek general truths by observing repeated cases, by isolating the object being observed, by controlling conditions as much as possible. Historians more usually seek specific truths about particular events, and rarely get to experiment. But the difference largely ends there. The underlying method is the same: historians try to sort out the false or subjective by employing the most proven means of distinguishing fact from opinion, evidence from argument, and using the most objective checks against error available. We seek to be precise in our terminology, and accurate and thorough in documenting and analyzing our evidence. Like scientists, we keep ourselves honest through peer review and public debate. Esoteric discussions of skepticism or “multiple subjectivities” aside, both the historian and the scientist seek to discover an objective reality. Nevertheless, because historians tend to work from incomplete information of varying or even uncertain reliability, making historical judgments is often as much art as science.

In the simplest of terms, when historians say “this happened in our past, but that did not,” they are issuing a kind of prediction: if they could use a time machine to peek back at the moment they are describing they would find that what actually took place would correspond to what they said. But in more practical terms, if something happened as historians claim, then it will have had causal effects on the whole world, and traces of this will remain. Pieces of evidence will exist that would not exist if the event that brought them about never occurred. So it is naive to suggest there is no truth in history to be sorted from the myths, falsities, and errors
that seem the bread and butter of human thought. There are claims that are more probably true than others, many that are most probably true, and many more that are most probably false, and in every case, it is the evidence that informs us and puts a check on human opinion and ulterior motive.

Of course there are ideologues, demagogues and mythmakers. There are pseudohistorians whose work mimics the work of true historians just as there are pseudoscientists whose work mimics that of true scientists. Fortunately there are ways to discredit them. Pseudohistorians will often fail to document key evidence they claim to interpret, or when they do they will fabricate it, or appear to provide it, but not really. They will omit evidence that might disprove their story. They will employ both classical and novel fallacies of all varieties in their reasoning. And they will avoid or dismiss the criticism of their peers by every excuse they can invent.

By contrast, true historians will identity every primary source, every shred of relevant evidence, so the reader will be able to check their claims. Where the evidence is incomplete and they have to speculate, they will admit it, keeping facts and judgment distinct. They seek to understand why things happened the way they did, and will openly use evidence to support their accounts, and by concealing nothing, and by not pretending their assumptions are facts, they permit the reader to reach his or her own judgment about the truth. Above all, they open themselves to the examination of their peers, and facilitate future scholarship by checking and correcting the claims of other historians. That is why their results are far more trustworthy, far more useful, than the products of dogmatists and demagogues.

We obviously do not want history in the hands of ideologues or mythmakers who don’t care about facts, but who will simply make up whatever suits their particular agenda. We want history in the hands of skilled researchers held to high standards of evidence and argument within a widespread framework of expert peer review, criticism, debate, and openness to progress and admission of error. As in science, a willingness to accept and live with uncertainty and doubt is essential to progress toward truth in history: for you cannot approach the truth without being willing to abandon the false. Truth in history, no less than in science, is conditional on future discoveries, and is built on probability, not any sort of unachievable certainty. The dogmatists, demagogues, and mythmakers will mislead and manipulate us and try to confuse our memory, but the historians will try their best to keep our collective memory deep and accurate, and above all brutally honest. In other words, to have a sharp and reliable memory, and to enjoy its benefits, we need the scientific historian. It is essential. But not just anyone can do the job. To have such experts requires years of highly specialized training.
When we maintain a rich community of competent historians, the historical profession provides several unique benefits to society. Historians perform at least five services with direct or indirect social benefits, surveyed here in their order of importance:

1. Historians solve big problems of significant importance to our understanding of ourselves and our past, or correct or improve the solutions to those problems worked out by past historians. This is the plum of historical progress, and though not a routine product, it is a fundamental social benefit.

2. Historians master all the technical work generated in their field and convey to the public, in terms non-specialists can understand, the fruits of all historical research to date. This is the ultimate end-product and most extensive social benefit of the historian.

3. Historians train future historians. History is one of those rare professions in which the professionals are both producers and teachers of the next generation of experts.

4. Historians teach what they know to a broad reach of students, who as citizens need an accurate knowledge of human history and a sense of historical method in order to become more informed and competent, essential to the health of a free democracy.

5. Historians solve small, esoteric problems and publish their findings in technical journals. This is the most common labor in history and creates the incremental progress other historians need: the more small problems that are solved and published and filed away for others to consult, the easier it becomes to solve the big problems, and the more thoroughly and accurately histories can be written for the public, and the more ably students can be taught, whether training to be historians themselves or just well-informed citizens. It is also this task that hones and improves an expert’s skills as an historian. There is simply no substitute for the long-term, technical, hands-on experience this provides. It improves, broadens, and deepens their understanding of the time and culture they study, making them more knowledgeable and insightful.

There is a sixth function for those historians who specialize in dead literate cultures, for these men and women are a vital resource in another unique respect: they can truly understand the old languages and thus connect us with the vast body of literature and human genius that would otherwise be lost behind meaningless symbols. It is truly naive to say, “it’s all been translated,” for it hasn’t. Vast numbers of documents do not exist in any English version, or indeed any modern language, and we are always finding more. But more importantly, translations mediate the past to the present but do not always accurately convey the true meaning, much less the beauty, of the original. Every translation is flawed. More-
over, modern words convey additional meanings and associations that were not present in the original language—and vice versa—and thus true understanding of the text is only possible in its original language, and with a deep and accurate understanding of its original context: social, cultural, historical, political, economic, and religious. So historians must work from the original language if they are to discover past errors, or refine past interpretations, or identify new insights gained from new discoveries that illuminate other texts. And yet this is only possible if this subtle linguistic and contextual knowledge is mastered, stored, and passed on in an unending chain from master to apprentice. Without this expensive intellectual architecture within society, the vast majority of human memory would be lost.

Finally, the historian might on occasion take up the useful role of historical activist. Legislators and statesmen do not want to hear about the historical development of Ibo art, but they do want to hear about how the history of Nigeria explains current political and social problems in that country. It is only within the latter context that solutions to social problems are to be found, as well as warnings against self-defeating attempts at solving them. This does not mean that esoteric subjects are useless to society, but we should not confuse how we came to understand a culture with how that understanding informs our political advice to those in power. Since a command of history, especially the ability to explode myth, is key to fruitful political diplomacy and progress around the world, the historian is more important in our world now than ever before.

Some people might still question the value of the technical papers on obscure subjects, which are the most common material product of any working historian. This must be understood. The historian writes in two different genres with two different goals: the technical paper or monograph, and the popular history. The second is, or certainly should be, the ultimate aim for which all history is done, and this end product could be said to be the ultimate social purpose of the historian. But it would not be possible, or certainly not of much quality, without the first activity performed in spades. Technical papers and monographs are indeed the brickwork of history. They are produced to aid all researchers and historians in getting access to and evaluating important facts and theories. Solutions or surveys of hyper-specific problems are collectively employed as the matter for comprehending and composing popular historical articles and monographs. But even more than this, in the very act of producing them historians perfect their ability and their knowledge, and it is through this legwork that they become a priceless asset. A technical piece characteristically skips over basic material and works from stan-
standard assumptions that have been established as accurate or true to the general satisfaction of all peers, since all expert readers will know this material, while historians out of the field can get it by reading the introductory literature. By maintaining a focus and speaking in a precise language shared by other informed experts, technical work achieves the goal of an efficient and practical furtherance of historical understanding, one piece at a time.

However, popular books and articles are the most important function of history. These educate the public about what really happened in our collective past, and make historical facts and knowledge available and comprehensible to society as a whole. In this respect they must be entertaining, but also true and simple and readable by any educated person. By their nature they cannot be as exhaustive, precise or thorough as technical works, since breadth, readability, and brevity are key to their success. Thus, this product of the historian avoids all the aspects of technical work that render it inaccessible to lay readers, such as specialized language, background assumptions, or foreign languages. Since progress is continually made in history, popular history is never perfect and can become obsolete, so the historian’s job is never done. Historians are ever at work refining and transmitting society’s memory, performing an irreplaceable social function.

The conclusion is clear: the ideologue, demagogue and mythmaker are not historians, and pseudohistory cannot benefit society. But real history can, and it requires well-trained and experienced historians. One might try to push the benefits of pseudohistory, as Plato did in the Republic, but these are pipe dreams. As soon as our understanding of the past is divorced from facts and objectivity-fostering methods, all opinions become equal, and there will be no benefit from any one history, because there will be others that will wash out and cancel the effects of the one anyone may favor. As such a scenario develops, pseudohistorians wedded to a false past may become willing to resort to the use of force and intimidation to control the public mind, which is essentially the defining feature of a Dark Age. Then, society will not flourish, but will stagnate and devour itself, breaking into divided units set against each other, as people rally around that version of a pseudohistory that pleases them most.

A society gripped by pseudohistory is a victim of social psychosis. It will suffer a memory disorder that, as with an individual whose memory is wholly fictional, will lead that society to confusion, despair, and self-defeating behavior. This is why theology tends to create more and more schisms but science tends to create more and more agreement: in the one case we base our allegiance on opinion alone; in the latter, our opinions
are checked by facts and objectivizing methods that we cannot simply wish away. And history applies the same scientific methods to literature and artifacts, as a corrective process that steers us toward what is true, and not what we merely wish to be true.

Even if all these difficulties could be overcome, pseudohistory only offers one supposed benefit to society: the ability to manipulate it, which is only of use to those in power. In contrast, true history offers several benefits of use to all people. We will know who we really are, not what someone else wants us to be. We will understand humanity outside the distorting lens of a single culture, a gain that pseudohistory often specifically aims to prevent. We will know what actually has and hasn’t worked, what actually has and hasn’t been tried, what humans are actually capable of, how things actually get done. Perhaps armed with that knowledge, we will be able to avoid past mistakes and recover past successes. Pseudohistory, in contrast, pays no attention to such realities and thus its results give us no such information about ourselves or the universe. It does not prepare us for the future. For that, you have to honor the historical craft, and fund the institutions that make its practice possible.