

Social Facts and History: Thoughts on Facts, Texts, and Truth

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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how historians should understand historical texts and social facts under the trend of post-modern thinking. Combined with Durkheim's concept of social facts, it shows that the concept of truth not only affects the rules and academic strategies of arguments in different periods but also affects the way historians process and utilize historical texts. Social fact is the symbol of social existence and Durkheim's perspective of examining society, which helps to understand the internal development of history clearly.

Keywords: Social facts, Historical writing, Postmodernism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social facts, as the very core of Durkheim's theories, are believed and put into practice for years. Historians may doubt it for less development of the idea. The influence of postmodernism on Western History has expanded since the 1970s, following the wave of historiography changes. The impact, however, did not appear to form a new modification of postmodern historiography involving specific historical studies. Here come the questions: does history mean truth? Do social facts relate to history study? To what extent could we connect history with social facts? This article makes postmodern history study an example and mainly argues that the mentality of historians changes more or less, leading to their acceptance of postmodernism and social facts in different conditions, primarily to focus on the traditional paradigm and process of history study.

2. THEORIES & OPINIONS

2.1. Theories

In the traditional sense, Durkheim has put forward the concept of social facts for more than a hundred years, but for a long time always cannot avoid discussing the characteristics of social facts. In Durkheim's view, social facts must be external to the individual, in other words, objective, independent of the will of man. In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, we can find that he divides social facts into two main

categories: material and immaterial. No matter belonging to the material bureaucracy, laws, regulations, or the immaterial culture, customs, morals, and other social facts, are independent of the consciousness of the objective existence is the objectivity of social facts. Because this kind of social fact is so objective that it also shows a property of compulsion [1]. Although the individual is a part of the collective, the individual does not have independent social facts to prove the preconditions; social facts can only describe the collective and show a universality.

However, this description has some defects, especially when we put the collective consciousness in the context of history, the primary methodology of sociology of social facts has a strange distortion. Is it acceptable for historians to accept that an external and coercive view binds their unique ideas? 19th-century European positivist historians may have embraced the objectivity of social fact, but the influence of ideology or culture on their historiography has acquiesced in for many historians. Besides those scholars who follow the traditional historical norms to construct historical views, this paper also focuses on those who are called postmodern historians. They analyze the traditional historiography methodology to some extent through the analysis of narrative and truth.

2.2. Opinions

Since the 18th century, the historical schools represented by Ranke have been developing

continuously. First, romantic historiography occupies the historical arena, followed by Ranke's objectivism historiography, and at the same time, Comte and Buckle's positivism historiography.

These historical views have always been universal. It is to abandon the false theological historical view, oppose to regard the absurd and ridiculous things in the Bible as credible history, publicly promote freedom, equality, and fraternity, and thus serve the bourgeois politics superficially. In addition, most of these views elucidate the thought of innate human rights, explain the origin and nature of the state, and try to replace religious beliefs with political beliefs [2]. At the same time, they believe that the civilization brought about by capitalism is a new universal thought and universal values, so as to achieve the ultimate society. Thus, these views have a strong purpose, a choice of historical methodology in a particular era of transformation.

In 1900, German historian Karl Lamprecht put forward the concept of *Kulturgeschichte* in his book, arguing about the rationality of the research methods of the Ranke school in terms of the object, theme, and method of historical research. In the same year, Henry Beyle, a French scholar, founded the magazine, aiming to establish new historiography different from traditional historiography, overcome the narrowness and closeness of traditional historiography, strengthen the connection between historiography and adjacent disciplines, and advocate interdisciplinary research [2].

James Robinson, an American historian, published the book *The New History* in 1912, which posed a powerful challenge to traditional historiography. Robinson believes that history should be all-encompassing, pay attention to the social function and practical value of history, and should be interdisciplinary in research methods. Liang Qichao, a Chinese critic, was influenced by this. In 1902, Liang put forward the idea of 'historical revolution' in 'new historiography', believing that the old historiography only centered on the emperor, and had no collective consciousness, national consciousness, and national consciousness. After he visited Europe, Liang's historical thought changed greatly, mainly because of the failure of his political career and the influence of neo-Kantians such as Rickert.

The revival of narrative history and the rise of post-modern historiography are rectification and development of post-war Western historiography and a milestone in the development of Western historiography throughout the 20th century. Narrativism emphasizes the shift from structure and process to the real-life experience of ordinary people and the reorganization of history itself, making the static history rise again and allowing humanism to be rediscovered by scholars.

In 1979, Lawrence Stone published *The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History*, which emphasized the abandonment of the Revival of Narrative and required the necessary literary form in historical writing. He believed that the rise of narrative marked the end of the era of traditional historical writing.

Hayden White is a representative of contemporary postmodern historiography. In 1973, his work *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* is an important symbol of the change of historical ideas during this period. He believes that historical writing is fundamentally a kind of 'historical imagination' and imaginative construction of historical processes. His purpose of writing is to make a deep analysis of these historical imaginations. White emphasizes that the author inevitably reveals a certain ideological tendency (which can also be seen as a social fact). In the process of their writing, they are also constrained by a deeper hierarchical structure, namely, the form of narrative metonymy (metaphor, metonymy, metonymy, irony, etc).

In general, postmodernism is a trend of thought, questioning the basic beliefs established during the Enlightenment, and doubting whether there is a pure fact that is divorced from experience. This article will integrate the concept of social facts, review the epistemology of historians, focus on the characteristics of postmodern historiography, and clarify the possible paradigm shift.

3. DISCUSSION

Before the discussion, the question to be stressed is what is 'truth' for scholars around the world. In China's cultural environment, the definition of truth is often different from that of the West. This problem is not only reflected in academia but also in translation. For example, the meaning of the word 'good' in the Bible has always become vague in Chinese. Some people understand it as 'benefit', and others understand it as 'kindness'. This applies equally to the understanding of the concept of truth.

This article will define the concept of truth within the scope of Durkheim's understanding. In Durkheim's thought, society has sublime materiality. He uses the concept of 'social fact' to express power, and even can be called 'god'. The so-called 'collective consciousness' refers to the sum of the common beliefs and emotions of general social members, which is not the mechanical addition of individual consciousness in essence. Law expresses collective feelings through coercive means such as punishment, indicating the dignity and strength of the society as an entity so that individuals can get along orderly and achieve social coordination and consistency [3]. In the period of Durkheim's observation,

the individual living in the modern society has been in an extreme environment for a long time, which is manifested in the rapid rise of the suicide rate in society. The process of social facts is as follows: first, religious problems turn into national problems, then national problems turn into national problems, and finally, national problems turn into social moral problems of the masses. This not only represents Durkheim's morality but also means that for Durkheim, the concept of truth is a spiritual journey from the individual to the whole, essentially derived from extreme individualism. Thus, 'truth' is more of a spiritual narrative than objectivism in historical tradition.

Positivist historiography in the 20th century, to a large extent, benefited from the industrial revolution and the spread of scientific theory. Taking the modern transformation of China as an example, Liang Qichao, the leading figure in the intellectual circle of modern China, put forward more than once in his works that historiography is not a simple narration of the past, but to explore the whole experience of human beings and their relationship. The task of historiography is to write history for the people and reflect the law of historical evolution [4].

The change of Liang's historical thought can well reflect the evolution of historical texts and social facts. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, China is facing great changes (the change of social facts caused by this drastic change is also a shred of strong argument evidence the western application of biological evolution theory to the ideological trend of human social history research, and formed the historical view of evolution. In 1902, he clearly expressed the view of social Darwinism. In fact, this view is also Liang's political demand [5]. As the most famous reformer in modern China, he needs scientific theory to support his political views.

In this period, the Chinese intellectual community was greatly encouraged by Japan. Japan was a window to explore western politics, law, system, economy, science, and technology, especially social thought, education, life, and customs. The mode of production of industrialization and the westernized culture as a substantive social fact continued to impact traditional Chinese society, so historians in this period were fascinated with scientism. Liang was still a traditional culturalist at this time, which was characterized by seeking identity from cultural aspects such as political tradition and replacing national identity with cultural identity rather than modern national relations. According to this view, the Confucian political ideal is to govern the world, the standard to distinguish civilization and barbarism is not the nation and region, but the cultural similarities and differences.

The communication also reflects the production process of traditional historiography (though advanced

for Chinese scholarship at that time) that follows a specific pattern of behavior. It can be said that the social facts in this period are closely related to historical texts, and due to the stable and scarce information sources, the social facts do not deviate significantly from historical texts.

Classical text, or historical text, helps to reveal the feasible moral assumptions and political essence under different social facts to present the diversity of historical interpretation [6]. Historical texts reveal a universal truth about the past society, and for us, it is more like revealing a truth about our era. Therefore, historical research on different social facts is the pursuit of universal truth and the adherence to the function of history itself. In Chinese tradition, there is a famous saying that history is the mirror, which means that the simplest role of history itself is to provide a lesson of self-awareness. That also means we should not push away the primitive function of history. Bringing the distance closer is the key to understanding the importance of the flaw between social facts and historical text.

So how do European historians deal with text? The distance between the past and the present is difficult to bridge. In other words, in postmodern discourse, when social facts become the background of historical research, it is difficult for historians to understand social facts correctly. That is the difference between historical texts and social facts [7]. Historical distance appears when historians use our current concept to identify people in the past (this concept even means the opposite). Furthermore, this historical distance is the difference between external social facts at different times. As the author says, 'Historians might say that Aristotle's text meant something to readers in the nineteenth century, or even that it means something to us, and they might do so even if that meaning is not one Aristotle or his contemporaries could plausibly have ascribed to the text [7]. This shows that history and social facts have a certain diachronic; they are dynamic at the same time. We cannot help to question: does the universal law of traditional historiography exist? Postmodern historiography gives some explanations.

By studying the classical works of famous European historians in the 19th century, Hayden White found that historians also quoted some general ideas and resorted to some general truth theory or proof while telling historical stories. Historians make history cognitively responsible through some kind of argumentation or rhetoric model, giving the 'fictional' history an element of authenticity. Based on the interpretation of classical historical works, Hayden White analyzed four kinds of the paradigm of argumentative interpretation. In fact, from the perspective of linguistics, he described four kinds of real discourse forms of history: Formalism means the use of impressionistic historical discourse

that describes the instantaneous experience of the subject in a personalized way, Organicism means the use of 'concepts' named at all levels and stages of the historical process, and Mechanism tends to create an abstract discourse that describes the generality and regularity of the results of the historical process. Contextualism is often used as a 'concept' to sketch historical scenes and reveal functional relationships between events [8]. These models reveal the profound thinking of historians and philosophers on historical cognition and show the possibility of diversified texts of real history.

As a unique part of history, postmodern historiography maintains the balance of historical truth and social facts. Hayden White did not show that the history mastered by historians through positivism was not true but believed that the historical truths understood by historians were more like 'facts' constructed by traditional historiography [9]. On this point, White is more likely to give a kind reminder: the pure truth is far from the historical text. In the discussion of his work, we can also say that knowledge construction is not consistent with social facts. In White's view, historians themselves have a kind of affinity for text, whether it is the traditional history represented by Ranke or the masters of the Annales School, who undoubtedly can reorganize past texts and show their unique charm.

What do pure truth, historical texts, and construction of knowledge suppose to mean? Baudrillard gave a reasonable explanation on how to understand the construction of knowledge. In his book *The Consumer Society*, he took capitalism and consumerism as examples to explain how capitalism flourishes [10]. This explanation is based mainly on the traditional discussion of production relations, but further analyzes the causes of this situation.

In the examination of postmodern discourse, capitalism, as a social fact of modern society, its strength lies in the use of self-deconstruction to resolve postmodern satire, and based on this, new cultural products have been produced. In other words, capitalism has turned self-criticism into a part of new production links. In addition, the common sense and experience that people need to perceive the world are derived from certain social facts, such as the rich and diverse tools that capital can provide. These tools were unforeseen by sociologists a hundred years ago: tools were not only not manipulated by people but began to dominate behavior. From this perspective, capitalism, as a social fact, has a self-consistent logic that conforms to rationality. At the same time, cultural products are gradually symbolized and then upgraded to human needs. In this social fact, capital (or a synonym for other social facts) becomes a new era. Religion seems to gradually become a reality.

The evolution of social facts has increasingly made the Disenchantment a kind of Re-Enchantment since the enlightenment. Even the object described by the word superstition can be extended here in the capital. If the right to interpret truth was once in the hands of theologians and feudal monarchs of the church, then the social facts formed at present inherit the role of religion.

Still taking capitalism as an example, it replaces authority with tenderness and subtlety, but at the same time it becomes a new authority, and the interpretation of truth is not in the hands of a virtual object or the spokesperson of God, but the choice of man based on free will, that is, capital. From another perspective, capital has also been internalized in human daily life through technology, and it has become the sense of human cognition of the external world by the way of technology. This feature leads to the end of criticism itself: you cannot choose to move stones to smash your feet.

4. CONCLUSION

History, especially postmodern historiography, has not always maintained its advantages in the debate between historical texts and social facts. The fundamental reason is that its core has limitations. On the one hand, it bedims history. White and other scholars can only rely on imagination and fiction based on existing historical relics and monuments. This way denies some cognition of reason and truth since the Enlightenment, to some extent, undermines the rules of traditional historiography. The relations between social facts and historical writing seem like an industrial process, it makes social facts have a sustainability model, and historical writing could be the mediator of the social facts. However, the technology and mass media deconstruct this conventional process, making it harder to study history in an old-Ranke-objectivist way. Excessive dependence on postmodern interpretation will lead to an extreme academic phenomenon. This phenomenon makes the main functions of the original history discipline challenging to be in functions, but it is beneficial to the progress of the discipline. Therefore, there is a necessity to instead regard postmodern interpretation as a historical and academic development trend than regard postmodernism as a strategy of academic analysis to maintain the original academic structure and increase critical analysis. In the discussion of text and reality, the introduction of Durkheim's concept of "social fact" can enable scholars to effectively grasp the change of academic paradigm caused by social facts, and at the same time, it can integrate the concept of "truth" into the discussion scope of current postmodern history more reasonably, thus forming a benign structure of historical research and epistemological development.

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