**History**

“History is (nothing) but the register of human crimes and misfortunes.”

Voltaire, 1694 – 1778

“Who controls the past controls the future, who controls the present controls the past.”

George Orwell, 1903 – 1950

“Those who don’t study the past are condemned to repeat it.”

George Santayana, 1863 – 1952

History seeks to study and explain the **significant** events of the past with the help of currently existing evidence. History is concerned not simply with describing the past, but also with explaining and understanding it. History is more than just a catalogue of important dates and events; historian may need to explain what happened and trying to understand why it happened.

The study of history can be justified because:

* it contributes to our sense of identity,
* it is a defense against the propaganda, and
* Enriches our understanding of human nature.

We should make distinction between the past and our knowledge of the past. Such knowledge is problematic because we can know the past only by reconstructing it on the bias of evidence that exists in the present. Since memory is fallible, evidence ambiguous and prejudice common, we might have serious doubts about the claim that historical knowledge is more objective than the scientific knowledge.

History is based on primary sources, but since they are a selective interpretation of events they cannot always be taken at face value. Since historians usually make a selection from the available evidence, there is a sense in which history books are twice removed from what actually happened. A primary source is one that is written by someone who was there at the time, while a secondary source is a later, second hand account of what happened.

Since each generation interprets the past in the light of its own experience, we might agree that history is ‘an unending dialogue between the present and the past’.

**The problem of bias**:

There are at least three reasons why someone might think that history is more prone to bias than the natural sciences.

**1. Topic choice bias** – a historian’s choice of topic may be influenced by current preoccupations. (Although a historian’s choice of topic may be influenced by the society he grows up in, this does not necessarily mean that the topic, once chosen, cannot be studied objectively.)

**2**. **Confirmation bias** – a historian might be tempted to appeal only to evidence that supports his own case and to ignore any counter-evidence. (Although history is selective and a bad historian may be tempted to simply find the facts he is looking for, a good historian is likely to do the opposite and actively seek out evidence that goes against his hypothesis.)

**3. National bias** – since people come to history with a range of pre-existing cultural and political prejudices, they may find it difficult to deal objectively with sensitive issues that touch on things like national pride. For example, questions such as ‘Why did the United States drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima?’ may be hard to answer without strong emotions coloring our interpretation of the facts. The danger is that we being with our prejudices and then search for the evidence to support them.

Although it is impossible to achieve a completely objective we can, perhaps, get closer to the truth by exploring the past from a variety of perspectives.

Since history deals with complex situations, historical events rarely have a single cause but are usually the result of combination of factors.

Two contrasting theories of history are:

* **The great person theory** – which says that history is determined by great individuals;
* **Economic determinism** – which says that it is determined by economic factors. It is not great individuals but rather technological and economic factors that are the engines of historical change (Karl Marx, 1818-1883).

Most people would agree that unpredictable events do play an important role in history. For example, if Hitler had died in a car accident in 1930, the history of Europe, and the world, would probably have been different.

We can understand both, the past and ourselves better, if we study history, than if we choose to ignore it.

“How can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us? If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man.

The white man's dead forget the country of their birth when they go to walk among the stars. Our dead never forget this beautiful earth, for it is the mother of the red man. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows, the body heat of the pony, and man --- all belong to the same family.

We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his father's grave behind, and he does not care. He kidnaps the earth from his children, and he does not care. His father's grave, and his children's birthright are forgotten. He treats his mother, the earth, and his brother, the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert.”

``American Indian Chief Seattle (1786 – 1866)

Ted Perry (ABC television drama, 1971.)