

Historian's Hindsight and Its Relationship with Historical Objectivity

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Abstract: Historical researchers cannot naturally have hindsight. Late-comers cannot take the establishment of man's subjectivity in historical cognitive activities for granted. From Croce, Collingwood to White, the objectivity of history is constantly being decomposed, and at the same time, historians' hindsight is gradually being weakened. However, Hegel and Marx reconstruct the premise and foundation of objective historical cognition through the dialectical criticism of thinking and the affirmation of the practical nature of human beings. Subjective intention is indispensable in historical facts. It and its dependent historical context are mutually constructed through practical activities. At the same time, hindsight can also reflect and criticize historians' "subjectivity". In this sense, the hindsight of historians is not only an ideal, but also a rational demand.

1. Introduction

The so-called "hindsight" literally refers to the views of later generations. Later generations should have more clear understanding on the experience of their predecessors: the statement is basically true for ordinary people. However, for historical researchers, to process "hindsight" is not an unalterable principle. On the contrary, when many historians use the word in their argumentation, they want to express the meaning of warning. It seems that they deliberately remind readers to be alert to "hindsight" in historical research, or even better to avoid the interference of "hindsight". This phenomenon, to some extent, suggests that historical researchers cannot naturally have hindsight when discussing history. So, for historians, is it possible to have hindsight? What role does human subjectivity play in the "hindsight" of historical research? In addition, in the pursuit of historical objectivity, is hindsight a lofty ideal or an inevitable demand of rational reflection? As far as historians are concerned, the problem is not self-evident; further discussion is necessary.

2. It's Hard to Have Hindsight

Generally speaking, the recognition of hindsight actually implies a presupposition. The past history is gone. Because of the expansion of space, time and distance, we can easily get a "panoramic" macro vision. This foothold of observation means that we are more likely to find the main trend of history, and it is not easy to "be lost in the game". This advantage comes from the natural position of latecomers.

As mentioned above, the viewpoint is "basically" right, but for professional historians, it does not stand up to questioning. The fundamental reason why hindsight gives us the basis for our argument is that we already know "existing results", but can "existing results" always be certain? For some specific historical details or relatively "hard" historical facts, such as time, people and places, they may be certain. But most of the time, we are not even enthusiastic about the "results" of such studies, because there is little room for discussion. The "results" that historians prefer to come up with often contain various judgments, involving the internal connection, as well as the influence and significance of historical facts. At this level, "results" are difficult to determine.

In fact, our views on existing results are also constantly changing. Historians of the same era often have different "hindsight" views, while historians of different times tend to have different views, and they are more likely to form huge cognitive differences of different "paradigms". This shows that the

“hindsight” also has its own interpretations, and it is difficult to determine which one is more “correct” in the end, so it is easy to slide to historical relativism.

Of course, this does not mean that different people always have different views on the same thing. We can still have some standards. As Ezel Tucker said, “it is surprising that historians with different interests, different backgrounds, different beliefs and nationalities, as well as different political views and collective identities can have similar views on history through their independent research, and they can also absorb many views on history from other researchers.” [1]

It can be seen that there are many levels of the “hindsight” of historians. Fundamentally speaking, hindsight comes from the cognitive activities of historians. These entangled phenomena show the complexity of historians in historical cognitive activities as cognitive subjects.

3. The Subjectivity of Man in Hindsight

Human beings have the instinctive desire to understand the external world, as well as the past history. As Russell said, “human beings are always confined to a narrow field of time and space... Therefore, there is always the yearning for the life beyond reality.” Historians “can wander in the world of ancients or latecomers, and observe the past and the future. It can help us to open up a new realm, and achieve a kind of spiritual selflessness or liberation under a kind of eternal concept.” [2] Human beings “always think about the past. (Otherwise, no matter how many documents we have, the past means nothing to us)”.[3] So Marc Bloch sighed, “for a long time, historians are judges in the palace of hell, praising and criticizing the dead according to their own will.”[4] It can be seen that historians are aware of their subjective role in historical cognition, although this kind of consciousness has various forms.

However, historians' confidence in hindsight in historical cognition has been constantly challenged. Is history in hindsight recognizable in essence? Although Ranke historians firmly believe in the objective reality of history, the scope and degree of this objective historical cognition are still doubted. A more challenging point of view is that the objective historical process is essentially impossible to grasp, because the discussion of history begins with historical facts, and “historical facts do not exist before any historian creates them”. “The objective past has gone forever, and the historical field is an unpredictable one, which is only recreated and reappeared in our imagination.” [5] For Croce and Collingwood, history is regarded as “contemporary history” and “history of thought”. However, as some critics expressed, “Collingwood's emphasis on historians' subjective consciousness is not an appropriate way to deny the objectivity of historical knowledge, because the construction of any knowledge, including natural science knowledge, cannot be separated from the participation of epistemologists' subjective consciousness. So we can't doubt history without doubting everything else.” [6]

Hayden White, who has a subversive influence on the objectivity and cognition of history, regards history as a “text” at the linguistic level and expresses the traditional historical research as “narration”. For White, the subjectivity of historians seems to have reached the state of “freedom”, and the hindsight of historians becomes an illusion. However, the reflection on the subjectivity of historians has always been profound. Gadamer points out Hegel's theoretical response to the challenge of historical objectivity. “The concept of understanding history as subjective knowledge is essentially rooted in the abstract understanding of thinking. It analyzes history through abstracting consciousness into an absolute basis point (intellectuality), and finally to make history become conscious.” He also points out that thinking is not external to history. As the existence mode of human consciousness, history is the dialectical development process of realistic consciousness, and “it should have indisputable objectivity”. [7]

Following Hegel's dialectical path, Marx further points out that, “people create their own history, but people's creative activities are not arbitrary.” “The existence of human is the result of the previous experience of organic life. It is only at a certain stage of the process that people become human beings. But once man exists, man, as the constant premise of human history, is also the frequent product and result of human history, and only as the product and result of himself can man become the premise.”

[8] Therefore, historians need to understand that the history itself must include the subjective intention of human beings, and that historians themselves are in the specific historical situation of human beings, which is the result of the repeated construction of human's subjective intention and practice objects.

4. Hindsight: Lofty Ideal or Rational Appeal?

On the one hand, historians recognize the presence and importance of subjective intention (rather than exclude all subjectivity), but at the same time, they should also clearly realize that it is insufficient to explain historical things only by the subjectivity of historical activists.

Popper intervened in historical understanding with the situational analysis method. Situational analysis advocates to "reconstruct the situation of problem encountered by the actor and make the actor more suitable for the situation". "Our speculative reconstruction of the situation may be a real historical discovery." [9] That is to say, the subjectivity of the subject of historical cognition is the fundamental guarantee for drawing on the subjective intention of predecessors. Therefore, "before the research, the subject of historical cognition should not eliminate all subjective factors; they need to further equip themselves." "Researchers must be aware of the non subjectivity of historical events and their own participation." The study of history is not "watching a fire from the other side"; it is "studying history in history". [10] The similarity of humanity gives historians a new dimension to understand the past. Herbert Butterfield, an English historian, said, "historians must place themselves in the position of historical figures, so as to feel their situation and think like that person. Without this art, it would be impossible to tell the story correctly, or interpret documents on which history was reconstructed." [11] Berlin, when discussing cultural relativism and human rights, said, "if you really understand the differences between individuals, groups, nations, and complete civilizations, and you can use your imagination to enter their ideological and emotional world, and you will be able to imagine how you will perceive the world and examine your relationship with others when you are in their living environment. (Full understanding, of course, does not mean total understanding.) Under that situation, even if you find what you observed is disgusting, the blind paranoia and fanaticism can be reduced". [12]

But this kind of "fancy" of human nature obviously takes considerable risks, which has aroused a lot of vigilance. Bloch sighed, "we may not have a good grasp of ourselves and the world today. Can we be sure to judge good and evil for our ancestors?" [13] He further pointed out, "scholars have not realized that past beliefs and taboos, traditional ideas and conventional opinions, and even secular prejudices can erode their brains and dominate their thoughts. We are not so free from prejudice as we think." [14] As Hegel said, "delusion that a kind of philosophy can go beyond its time is as stupid as the delusion that an individual can jump out of his time and out of the island of Rhodos."

So how can historians transcend the fact that they are also in specific historical situations? Or is it necessary to transcend this limitation? In fact, Bloch's words can also be viewed from another angle. Since everyone can't "jump out of his time", the truth of "unable to jump out" shows the objective basis of historians' cognition. Therefore, in Gadamer's view, the interpreter who is realistic and exists in a specific historical situation is a limited subject, and the objective knowledge that this subject can constitute is "biased" or intentional, "Bias" can be a positive premise for a limited interpreter to understand history, rather than a barrier or negative factor that must be removed. In this regard, "in fact, the historicity of our existence contains what is called a bias in the sense of the word, which constructs the initial direction for our entire capacity of experience. Prejudice is our tendency to be open the world." What kind of bias we want to get rid of in hindsight is the key.

In fact, it is possible for different individuals in the same era or across time and space to understand and communicate with each other, which is precisely because of this "bias". Therefore, Collingwood said, "the historical change from one way of thinking to another is not the death of the former, but its survival which is combined into a new context, including the development and criticism of its own ideas." [15]

5. Summary

The “foresight” contained in the “hindsight” of historians when they understand history cannot and need not be eradicated, because the “foresight” also has the objective basis. When we “study losers in a sympathetic manner,” Bellin points out, “it's a way to overcome (the adverse effects of) our current knowledge of results.”[14] In other words, historians of “subjective” can also ask themselves to avoid “subjective” and pursue “objective” when they understand history. The historians' objective words and thoughts mean, “when using certain rules and moral actions, they adopt a way of cognitive responsibility.”[15] “Objective speaking” is a subjective behavior, but it is the self reflection and criticism of the subjective, which will make us close to “objective”. It is not only an ideal but also a realistic demand. Here, objectivity and subjectivity are connected.

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