

**BRINTON
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AN ETHNOLOGIST'S VIEW
OF HISTORY

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*An Ethnologist's View of History An Address Before the Annual Meeting of
the New Jersey Historical Society, at Trenton, New Jersey, January 28, 1896:*

ISBN <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/29554>

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Mr. President:

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The intelligent thought of the world is ever advancing to a fuller appreciation of the worth of the past to the present and the future. Never before have associations, societies and journals devoted to historical studies been so numerous. All times and tribes are searched for memorials; the remote corners of modern, medieval and ancient periods are brought under scrutiny; and going beyond these again, the semi-historic eras of tradition and the nebulous gleams from pre-historic milleniums are diligently

scanned, that their uncertain story may be prefaced to that registered in "the syllables of recorded time."

In this manner a vast mass of material is accumulating with which the historian has to deal. What now is the real nature of the task he sets before himself? What is the mission with which he is entrusted?

To understand this task, to appreciate that mission, he must ask himself the broad questions: What is the aim of history? What are the purposes for which it should be studied and written?

He will find no lack of answers to these inquiries, all offered with equal confidence, but singularly discrepant among themselves. His embarrassment will be that of selection between widely divergent views, each ably supported by distinguished advocates.

As I am going to add still another, not exactly like any already on the list, it may well be asked of me to show why one or other of those already current is not as good or better than my own. This requires me to pass in brief review the theories of historic methods, or, as it is properly termed, of the Philosophy of History, which are most popular to-day.

They may be classified under three leading opinions, as follows:

1. History should be an accurate record of events, and nothing more; an exact and disinterested statement of what has taken place, concealing nothing and coloring nothing, reciting incidents in their natural connections, without bias, prejudice, or

didactic application of any kind.

This is certainly a high ideal and an excellent model. For many, yes, for the majority of historical works, none better can be suggested. I place it first and name it as worthiest of all current theories of historical composition. But, I would submit to you, is a literary production answering to this precept, really *History*? Is it anything more than a well-prepared annal or chronicle? Is it, in fact anything else than a compilation containing the materials of which real history should be composed?

I consider that the mission of the historian, taken in its completest sense, is something much more, much higher, than the collection and narration of events, no matter how well this is done. The historian should be like the man of science, and group his facts under inductive systems so as to reach the general laws which connect and explain them. He should, still further, be like the artist, and endeavor so to exhibit these connections under literary forms that they present to the reader the impression of a symmetrical and organic unity, in which each part or event bears definite relations to all others. Collection and collation are not enough. The historian must “work up his field notes,” as the geologists say, so as to extract from his data all the useful results which they are capable of yielding.

I am quite certain that in these objections I can count on the suffrages of most. For the majority of authors write history in a style widely different from that which I have been describing. They are distinctly teachers, though not at all in accord as to what

they teach. They are generally advocates, and with more or less openness maintain what I call the second theory of the aim of history, to wit:

2. History should be a collection of evidence in favor of certain opinions.

In this category are to be included all religious and political histories. Their pages are intended to show the dealings of God with man; or the evidences of Christianity, or of one of its sects, Catholicism or Protestantism; or the sure growth of republican or of monarchical institutions; or the proof of a divine government of the world; or the counter-proof that there is no such government; and the like.

You will find that most general histories may be placed in this class. Probably a man cannot himself have very strong convictions about politics or religion, and not let them be seen in his narrative of events where such questions are prominently present. A few familiar instances will illustrate this. No one can take either Lingard's or Macauley's History of England as anything more than a plea for either writer's personal views. Gibbon's anti-Christian feeling is as perceptibly disabling to him in many passages as in the church historians is their search for "acts of Providence," and the hand of God in human affairs.

All such histories suffer from fatal flaws. They are deductive instead of inductive; they are a *defensio sententiarum* instead of an *investigatio veri*; they assume the final truth as known, and go not forth to seek it. They are therefore "teleologic," that is, they

study the record of man as the demonstration of a problem the solution of which is already known. In this they are essentially “divinatory,” claiming foreknowledge of the future; and, as every ethnologist knows, divination belongs to a stadium of incomplete intellectual culture, one considerably short of the highest. As has been well said by Wilhelm von Humboldt, any teleologic theory “disturbs and falsifies the facts of history;”¹ and it has been acutely pointed out by the philosopher Hegel, that it contradicts the notion of progress and is no advance over the ancient tenet of a recurrent cycle.²

I need not dilate upon these errors. They must be patent to you. No matter how noble the conviction, how pure the purpose, there is something nobler and purer than it, and that is, unswerving devotion to rendering in history the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

I now turn to another opinion, that which teaches that —

3. History should be a portraiture, more or less extended, of the evolution of the human species.

This is claimed to be the “scientific” view of history. It was tersely expressed by Alexander von Humboldt in the phrase: “The history of the world is the mere expression of a

¹ In his epochal essay “Die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers.” *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. I., s. 13. It was republished with a discriminating introduction by Professor Steinthal in *Die Sprachphilosophischen Werke Wilhelm von Humboldt's* (Berlin, 1883).

² “Der Zweck-Begriff bewirkt nur sich selbst, und ist am Ende was er im Anfange, in der Ursprünglichkeit, war.” *Encyclopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*. Theil, I., § 204.

predetermined, that is, fixed, evolution.”³

It is that advocated by Auguste Comte, Draper and Spencer, and a few years ago Prof. Gerland, of Strasburg, formulated its basic maxim in these words: “Man has developed from the brute through the action of purely mechanical, therefore fixed, laws.”⁴

The scientist of to-day who hesitates to subscribe to these maxims is liable to be regarded as of doubtful learning or of debilitated intellect. I acknowledge that I am one such, and believe that I can show sound reasons for denying the assumption on which this view is based.

It appears to me just as teleologic and divinatory as those I have previously named. It assumes Evolution as a law of the universe, whereas in natural science it is only a limited generalization, inapplicable to most series of natural events, and therefore of uncertain continuance in any series. The optimism which it inculcates is insecure and belongs to deductive, not inductive, reasoning. The mechanical theory on which it is based lacks proof, and is, I maintain, insufficient to explain motive, and, therefore, historic occurrences. The assumption that history is the record of a necessary and uninterrupted evolution, progressing under ironclad mechanical laws, is a preconceived theory as detrimental to clear vision as are the preoccupations of

³ “Die Weltgeschichte ist der blosse Ausdruck einer vorbestimmten Entwicklung.” (Quoted by Lord Acton.)

⁴ “Die Menschheit hat sich aus natürlicher, tierischer Grundlage auf rein natürliche mechanische Weise entwickelt.” *Anthropologische Beiträge*, s. 21.

the theologian or the political partisan.

Any definition of evolution which carries with it the justification of optimism is as erroneous in history, as it would be in biology to assert that all variations are beneficial. There is no more certainty that the human species will improve under the operation of physical laws than that any individual will; there is far more evidence that it will not, as every species of the older geologic ages has succumbed to those laws, usually without leaving a representative.

I am aware that I am here in opposition to the popular as well as the scientific view. No commonplace is better received than that, "Eternal progress is the law of nature;" though by what process eternal laws are discovered is imperfectly explained.

Applied to history, a favorite dream of some of the most recent teachers is that the life of the species runs the same course as that of one of its members. Lord Acton, of Oxford, in a late lecture states that: "The development of society is like that of individual;"⁵ and Prof. Fellows, of the University of Chicago, advances the same opinion in the words, "Humanity as a whole develops like a child."⁶

The error of this view was clearly pointed out some years ago by Dr. Tobler.⁷ There has been no growth of humanity at large at

⁵ *A Lecture on the Study of History*, p. 1 (London, 1895).

⁶ See his article "The Relation of Anthropology to the Study of History," in *The American Journal of Sociology*, July, 1895.

⁷ Ludwig Tobler, in his article "Zur Philosophie der Geschichte," in the *Zeitschrift*

all comparable to that of the individual. There are tribes to-day in the full stone age, and others in all stages of culture above it. The horizons of progress have been as local as those of geography. No solidarity of advancement exists in the species as a whole. Epochs and stadia of culture vary with race and climate. The much talked of "law of continuity" does not hold good either in national or intellectual growth.

Such are the criticisms which may be urged against the historical methods now in vogue. What, you will ask, is offered in their stead? That which I offer is the view of the ethnologist. It is not so ambitious as some I have named. It does not deal in eternal laws, nor divine the distant future. The ethnologist does not profess to have been admitted into the counsels of the Almighty, nor to have caught in his grasp the secret purposes of the Universe. He seeks the sufficient reason for known facts, and is content with applying the knowledge he gains to present action.

Before stating the view of the ethnologist, I must briefly describe what the science of Ethnology is. You will see at once how closely it is allied to history, and that the explanation of the one almost carries with it the prescription for the other.

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