

.Historiography in the Twentieth Century

In early twentieth century, the ideas of many thinkers, historians and philosophers of history considerably contributed to the historical thought, and consequently, to the philosophy of history. Some of the prominent thinkers and their contribution to the discipline of history are briefly discussed below:

Max Weber

(b. 1864-d. 1920), a twentieth-century German thinker and sociologist, is regarded as one of the founders of sociology, particularly of political sociology. His important works include (i) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), and (ii) *Economy and Society* (published posthumously). In addition, he also wrote and published on world religions.

Weber's works and ideas bear the stamp of many nineteenth-century thinkers. More particularly, he was inspired and influenced by Marx and Nietzsche: Though Weber greatly differed from Marx on many points, he interpreted and considerably modified, contributed and added to Marxist theory. Friedrich Nietzsche (b. 1844-d. 1900) was a German philosopher and philologist, who challenged the notion of universality of values, and believed in the multiplicity of values. To Nietzsche, it was difficult to differentiate between rationality and irrationality, and impossible to make a rational choice between values.

Weber asserted the role and importance of ideas in determining historical change and the progress of time. He maintained that in addition to economic actors, ideas might also play an important role in bringing about historical change. He maintained that ideas

have an, independent existence of their own, and ideas are not necessarily born out of the economic structure of a society. He recognized the significance of economic factors in history like Marx, but expanded his thesis to include ideological factors in determining historical change. In fact, the dialogue between Marx and Weber has firmly established the practice of searching for the priority of causes in historical studies.

Weber also tried to synthesize the Hegelian and Marxist positions. Weber's work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) was an attempt to establish the primacy of ideas as agents of historical change over other factors, which also countered the Marxist assertion that economic factors are the most important determinants in causation in history. Weber argued that the rise of capitalism in the West was the result of some ideas, such as the Protestant work ethics, which emphasized hard work, and change in the value of poverty, which the Catholics celebrated as a virtue but Protestantism-allowed accumulation of wealth, provided a person gives charity. The resulting accumulation of wealth later led to the emergence of capitalism. While exploring the causes of the rise of capitalism in Europe, Weber also faced the question of why capitalism could not emerge in non-European societies such as China and India, where the religious doctrines did not permit accumulation of wealth, and thus, were not conducive to the rise of capitalism.

Max Weber, like other philosophers of history, also tried to interpret history philosophically, and view the past in a holistic manner. While doing so, he was quite conscious of the fact that the historical developments of the West had been different from those in other parts of the world. Therefore, Weber tried to avoid making any universal generalization unlike Marx, who had generalized his thesis to all societies and

to all times. Though Weber is said to have challenged the Euro-centric approach to history, his own views about the uniqueness of European history have been challenged, as his critics assert that ancient and medieval non-European societies possessed the same qualities possessed by the Europeans, and were as rational as the latter. In addition, Weber also stressed the importance of cultural conditions for understanding the development of history.

Weber also modified and added to the Marx's theory of class. Marx's concept of social stratification (the division of society into strata) suggested that there is always a congruence or high class (possessing enormous wealth), status (social prestige), and authority (political power) positions. It means that only the wealthy people enjoy social status and political authority. On the contrary, Weber asserted that the three hierarchies of stratification class, status, and authority may not be simultaneously enjoyed by the same people in some societies. Weber also dealt with problems such as the relationship between culture and institutions, between social stratification and distribution of exercise of power, and between the social structure and the emergence and regulation of political conflicts. The concept of nation-state served as the basic frame of reference in Weberian thought.

Weber has been hailed as the Marx of the middle class, as he challenged the Marxist notion of division of society into two groups: the possessing haves and the non-possessing haves-not, and recognized the presence of a middle class. Moreover, Weber believed that the abolition of private property may not necessarily improve the conditions of the working classes. Like many other thinkers of the nineteenth century Weber also discussed the transition of society from premodern traditional to modern-

rational society. He particularly pointed out that in modern times, traditional authority was gradually being replaced by rational-legal authority. (Traditional authority is the authority which rests upon time honored beliefs and norms. People respect it because they think it has always existed.) Weber asserted that the Western society was gradually being rationalized and bureaucratized having hierarchies.

Oswald Spengler

(b. 1880-d. 1936) was another German thinker and philosopher of history. His important works include () *The Decline of the West* (1917), and (11) *Today and Destiny*. He was influenced by the ideas of German poet-philosopher, Goethe (b. 1749-d. 1832). Moreover, his Works seem to be influenced by Ibn Khaldun and Voltaire, though he did not acknowledge it.

Culture constituted the basic frame of reference in Spengler's thought. He asserted that cultures are "organisms, and world history is their collective biography. Culture is the prime phenomenon of all past and future world history". He interpreted history with the help of his theory of culture-cycles while exploring the differences and similarities among various cultures by undertaking their comparative study, he argued that different cultures were equal in terms of stages of their history, and followed a similar pattern of rise, growth, decline and fall. His theory of the development of cultures is cyclical. None the less, he challenged other Euro-centric views of the day, and maintained that each culture had its peculiar self-expression, which is expressed in the form of arts, sculpture, music, architecture, philosophy and production of knowledge. Spengler also maintained that each culture, in its deepest essence, is unique and different from other cultures. Moreover, each culture is limited in duration and self-

contained, just as each plant has its peculiar fruit, its special type of growth and decline. Each culture has its own equally valid view of the reality. Like Weber, he was also conscious of the fact that the historical developments of the West have been different from those in other parts of the world. Therefore, he also avoided making any universal generalization about history and historical change.

It is always difficult to challenge a dominant discourse. Spengler believed in cultural relativity when the hegemonic western cultural supremacy was not easy to be challenged. Cultural relativism argues that cultures are relative in the sense that what is good and right in one culture or society may not be so in others. Therefore, values and institutions of a culture must be taken to be self-validating. He rejected the idea of progress and asserted-that the Western Civilization had reached its completion and thus, it has finished the life history of its soul. He predicted the decline of the West. His ideas generated altogether a new discourse regarding the decline of Civilizations, especially of the Western Civilization. In fact, Spengler was among those German thinkers of early twentieth century who had a feeling that something was wrong with industrialism and-rationality, and-that with modernity something noble had been lost. These thinkers romanticized the traditions of the past, and were critics of modernity and growing materialism. Spengler not only questioned the idea of progress, he also challenged the view that democracy was the final political structure. He asserted that there might emerge new forms or political system in future.

He rejected positivism and positivistic notion of a 'science of history'. He argued that scientific method has no universal validity, and hence, cannot be applied to all disciplines. He maintained that the evolution and development of culture would always

remain a metaphysical mystery, beyond the comprehension of human beings. Spengler also rejected the periodization of history- In three phases: ancient, medieval and modern. According to him, this uniplanar periodization of history was Euro-centric. His critics argue that he could not see the possibility of cultural synthesis, and the development of a global human culture.

Benedetto Croce

Benedetto Croce (b: 1866-d.1952) was an Italian politician, critic and philosopher. His works, particularly *History: His Theory and Practice* (1917), greatly influenced historical thinking. He also wrote the histories of Europe, Italy and Naples, which were of didactic nature. In addition, he contributed a number of philosophical essays on the nature of history. According to Croce, philosophy and history are linked together, and cannot exist without each other. Therefore, like Vico, Croce argued that history should be written only by philosophers, and philosophy is nothing more than the methodology of history. He denied that there is any plan in history. He rejected the idea that history is a science, and tried to differentiate between historical and scientific research. He asserted that history is an art in his famous essay on the

Subject, published in 1893. He argued that history is a series of lies, and people must choose the one which seems closest to the truth. He criticized the perspective and approach of the historian's famous statement that 'all history is contemporary history'. According to him, history is reaction of the past in the mind of historians, who write history of the past events in the light of the present day concepts, values and norms, which adversely affects historiography. In other words, the historians view history

through the eyes of the present. He influenced many historians, and the foremost among them was R. G. Collingwood, who authored the Idea History (1945).

Regarding the debate of idea vs. matter (Hegelian vs. Marxist positions), Croce took the idealist position, and insisted that all history is the history of thought. He believed that human ideas, whether of science, art or history, are historically conditioned as they can be seen as a response to historically specific problems and reflect the concerns on a particular age. They even went to the extent of arguing that every definition is historically specific, and a response to particular circumstances.

Arnold Toynbee

Arnold Toynbee (b. 1889-d. 1975) was an English philosopher-historian, who studied Greek and Latin at Oxford University, and later taught ancient history. His important works include (i) A Study of History (12 vols. published 1934-196), and (ii) Civilization on the March (1948).

Toynbee used civilization as his basic unit of analysis or frame of reference. He presumed that the histories of all civilizations were in some sense parallel, and they all follow the same pattern of decline and fall. He thoroughly analyzed and undertook comparative studies of twenty-six civilizations from where he derived his theory of Challenge and Response. Toynbee's philosophy of history is based on this theory, employing the concept of civilization as his basic frame of reference, he maintained that the history of all past civilizations, particularly their genesis, growth, decline and disintegration could be explained with the help of his theory.

According to this theory, if a civilization 'creatively responds to a challenge, it will sustain and grow, but if a civilization fails to adequately and creatively respond to the challenge, it will gradually decline and disintegrate. A creative minority responds to the challenges since all members of a society are unable to creatively respond to the challenge. The creative minority must come up with ever-new responses to ever-new challenges. To him, the genesis, growth, decline and disintegration of civilizations follow a cyclical pattern. A civilization must continue to undergo challenge-response-mimesis cycle all the time in order to grow and develop further. If the process stops, decline will set in the civilization. However, some failures do not count. It is the institutionalized failure to be creative that proves disastrous for a Civilization.

Toynbee, however, did not specify the type or nature of challenge, and thus, covers all types of challenges like economic (e.g. economic depression), environmental (e.g. earthquake, famine, drought or flood), ideological (e.g. rationalism and modernism), and technological (e.g. weapons and nuclearization) challenges, etc. He believed that civilization was the means and religion the end. He interpreted civilization as a humble servant of religion, and stated that Civilizations appeared only to be stepping stones to higher things, on the religious plane. For instance, according to Toynbee, the most useful function of Greco-Roman Civilization was that it gave birth to Christianity before disappearing.

Like Spengler, Toynbee was also critical of modern civilization, and hence, dubbed it as monotonous, 'superfluous and 'subversive. The modern secularized scientific technological Civilizations-appears to Toynbee only an almost meaningless repetition of something that the Greek and Romans did before us.

He argued that God is not only a historical fact; He is the supreme historical fact. For Toynbee, history is a wager or a bet between God and the devil, who challenged the former to give him a free hand to corrupt human beings. This idea was taken from Goethe, who took it from the Old Testament. Toynbee also suggested that religion was the only subject worthy of historian's attention. His critics suggest that he transformed history into theology, and his philosophy of history indicates a total return to the theological stage.

E. H. Carr

Edward Hallett Carr (b. 1892-d. 1982) was a British historian, historiographer, and journalist, who also contributed to international relations. Most of his historical works focused on the history of Soviet Union. His famous works include (i) *What is History?* (1961) (ii) *Nationalism and after (1945)*, (iii) *A History of Soviet Russia (14-vols., 1950-1978)*, and (iv) *The Russian Revolution: From Lenin to Stalin (1917-1929)* (1979).

Carr was an opponent of the notion of empiricism in history, and believed that facts do not speak for themselves. He argued that a historian chooses the facts in an arbitrary manner, making some facts historical and significant, and others insignificant. He questioned the notion of objectivity and complete impartiality of historians while conducting historical research, and insisted that historians select and interpret facts according to their own interests. He argued that historians may offer different interpretations of same historical facts. The over emphasis on the role of historians in the writing of history tends to make history subjective. He denied the possibility of an objective history a history without any impact on a historians personal views and beliefs. To him, history was an unending dialogue between the past and the present.

Carr highlighted the importance of causation in historical research, and declared history to be the study of causes. He denied the role of chances in historical causation, and insisted that historians should search for rational causes behind events, which could be generalized and applied to the study of other historical events. Later, the issue of historical causation was de-emphasized by the post-modernist thinkers, to whom the search for causes of historical events was futile: instead, the post-modernist thinkers stressed on the search for explanations.

To Carr, history is a science for the following reasons: (i) historical research makes generalizations; (ii) from history, one can learn lessons; (iii) though historians cannot predict specific events, the generalizations made from the past events can indicate a future course of events; and (iv) historians can choose to leave aside the questions pertaining to religion and morality. He was not in favor of historians making value judgments, and believed that historians can be objective in functional sense.

Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault (b. 1926-d. 1984) was a French philosopher, historian and sociologist, who tremendously contributed to contemporary historical thought. His important works include (1) *Madness and Civilization* (1961), (i) *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), (ii) *The Order of Things* (1966), (iv) *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), (V) *The Will to Knowledge* (1976), and (vi) *The History of Sexuality* (1976).

Foucault challenged the conventional historical thinking, and viewed the past from a new perspective. He focused on unusual themes such as-madness, psychiatry, medicine, punishment prisons and sexuality. He denied the existence of a goal or purpose in history, as suggested by Hegel and Marx. Moreover, he challenged the view of

Enlightenment thinkers and philosophers that human rationality has gradually triumphed over human nature. He believed that multiple forms of rationality existed. He also explored the relationship between knowledge and power.

He also challenged the progressive view of the past which sees the present as, an evolutionary advance over the past. Moreover, he asserted that history is without any constants, i.e. a stable or persistent phenomenon that does not change. He rejected the idea of continuity in history. To him, human history presents an array of discontinuities. Therefore, a coherent or recurrent pattern cannot be identified in history.

Foucault insisted that objectivity in historical research and history writing is a myth, and a historian can never be objective while writing history. All theories, explanations and interpretations of past historical events reflect the subjective approach of the historians. He shared the view of Croce that all history of the past has been written in the light of the perspective of the present. However, the past, according to Foucault, can only be explained in the light of the perspective of the present.

Edward W. Said

Edward W. Said (b. 1935-d. 2003) was a Palestinian-American political activist and literary theorist. His best-known work is *Orientalism* (1978), which has tremendously influenced the contemporary historical thought, particularly the oriental studies. His other books include (i) *Covering Islam* (1981), and (ii) *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (1990). In his work *Orientalism*, Said attacked the assumptions of the Western Orientalists (scholars of Oriental studies) who studied the East or the Orient, and argued that their approach was marked by prejudices and biases towards the Muslims, and their society, culture and institutions. *The Works of the Orientalists*

provided justification for colonialism and imperialism of the Europeans and Americans in Asia and Africa. The motive behind the study of the non-Western people was not to produce knowledge for knowledge's sake, but to help the colonialists to legitimize their conquests and exploit the non-Western nations.

To Said, Orientalism is not only a positive doctrine about the Orient and an influential academic tradition, it is fundamentally a political doctrine wielded over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness. As a result, the works of the Orientalists were far from being objective, and reflected their biases. The Orientalists highlighted the differences between the East and the West. To them, the Orient or the East was constructed as an irrational, weak, feminized "Other, in contrast to the rational, strong masculine West or the Occident. Said further argued that the contemporary historiography as well as the present-day attitudes of the West, as reflected in media and academia, represent a legacy of Orientalism, since the images of the Orient constructed by the Orientalists still inform the contemporary views and discourses about the East.

The arguments and works of Said have received mixed reactions. While his Orientalism thesis has opened new ways of looking at the history of the colonial societies, his critics assert that his construction of the East is confined largely to the Middle East. Moreover, his views are sometimes contradictory, and he employs a less systematic and methodologically less rigorous approach.

Samuel P. Huntington

Samuel P. Huntington (b. 1927-d. 2008) was an American political scientist, and the author of *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), which was

an elaboration of his famous article "The Clash of Civilizations?" published in 1993. His thesis generated much debate among intellectual circles. Huntington argued that in the Cold War era, the conflict was between the Democratic-Capitalist West and the Communist Bloc in the East. However, in future, the conflict would occur between the major civilizations of the world, namely, The Western, Latin American, Islamic, Chinese, Hindu, Orthodox, Japanese, and African Civilizations. Thus, the future conflict would not occur between states, rather the conflict would occur in the realm of culture. He highlighted the cultural differences among the civilizations, instead of nations and countries. However, he failed to take into account the cultural differences within civilizations, especially those with huge geographical stretch, and including multiple countries. The clash of civilization thesis has been challenged by many scholars including Edward Said and Ali A. Mazrui. According to critics, his thesis provides a justification for the Euro-American aggression against China and the Muslim countries.

Francis Fukuyama

Francis Fukuyama (b. 1952) is a second-generation Japanese- American philosopher and political economist. His most famous but highly controversial work is the *End of History and the Last Man* (1992), which contains his 'end of history' thesis. In his book, Fukuyama maintains that

Hegel attempted to write a universal history, and Hegel argued that the history of the world is the story of the gradual progress of reason, consciousness and freedom. According to Hegel, history would come to an end when the reason and freedom would fully be realized and achieved by humanity, i.e. when the 'Absolute Idea' would be fully revealed to the people. Similarly, Fukuyama argues that the human history has come to

an end with the rise of the liberal Western democracy as the only global and universal political order that is viable. In human history, ideological conflicts and struggles have come to an end after the end of the Cold war and fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This end of ideological conflicts is accompanied with the global triumph of democracy, along with Western liberal economy, as the final form of government. With this, history has come to an end.

The historians critical of Fukuyama's 'end of history thesis argue that history has not come to an end. In his recent book *Our Posthuman Future* (2002), Fukuyama speculates a recommencement of history in future. Some historians defend the end of history thesis, arguing that Fukuyama actually meant the end of a universal history of human society. Others point out that Fukuyama does not take into account the different variants of liberal democracy practiced in different countries around the world. Moreover, he does not take into account the various forms of Islamic deficiencies. The critics of liberal democracy point out the deficiencies in his thesis, and question the idea of its universal triumph.