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The limits of historical knowledge

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This paper sets out the limitations of knowledge from the past and the ways that knowledge can be used. The first part deals with the extent to which the past can be known and raises questions about the survival of evidence and also about the ways evidence is interpreted. The second part looks briefly at possible uses of the past and suggests, in particular, the importance of new interpretations challenging the received wisdom and thus giving societies new ways of looking at themselves and their histories.

There has much discussion recently about the limits of physical and scientific knowledge. What about historical knowledge? Do similar observations apply? I think two questions particularly need to be addressed as we think about historical knowledge and its limitations. (1) How far can the past be known? (2) How far can the past be used?

How far can the past be known?

The first problem we are faced with here is that of evidence. Unlike astronomers, historians are not in the happy position of actually being able to see the past. Our knowledge of it is something that, by its very nature, is largely accidental: the survival of evidence. Obviously we know, and will always know, far more about societies that left some form of written record, than about societies that either did not possess the art of writing, or whose records have failed to survive. The latter are obviously those societies most at risk of historical oblivion. Whole civilizations have vanished, leaving at best a few shadowy legends in the collective memories of successor civilizations. Those earlier civilizations, unless they left other forms of evidence behind them, are now effectively beyond historical recall.

Clearly, archaeological evidence provides the best hope of recovering something of the past of 'people without history'. Over the past century, the gains in historical knowledge through the discovery, excavation and interpretation of

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historical sites and artefacts have been considerable, whether regarding the Moche civilization of north-western Peru, or the Amazonian Indians – the subject of a recent splendid exhibition at the British Museum. Sometimes, too, we are faced with societies that did leave a form of written record, but one that defied interpretation by modern scholars. Here, perhaps the most spectacular breakthrough in our own times has been the reconstruction of significant areas of the great Mayan civilization of Yucatan and central America, as a result of the success, during the second half of the 20th century, of a series of scholars in cracking the code of Mayan glyphs. We now have the names and regnal dates of many Mayan rulers, who previously were no more than anonymous profiles incised on stone.

Yet despite these advances – which there is every reason to think will continue and, indeed, gather pace – our knowledge of many past societies is likely to remain largely a blank. No doubt, as Sir Thomas Browne once wrote, 'What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture'. But there must be a modicum of documentation, whether written or visual, if we are to move beyond conjecture. All too often, alas, that modicum is non-existent.

Where we are dealing with well-documented societies, whether occidental or oriental, we are obviously in far better shape. Historical writing is a cumulative process, and through the labours of generations of historians, much more information is available to us about, say, the history of ancient Greece and Rome, or that of Medieval and early Modern Europe, than was available a century ago. Much of this new knowledge comes from the appearance of new documentary evidence, deriving, for instance, from the opening of archives that were previously inaccessible, or the discovery of caches of previously unknown documents.

A great deal of it, however – and perhaps the most important part – comes from the reappraisal of evidence already in the public domain. To take one characteristic example: it is many years now since the records of the Inquisition, in Spain and elsewhere, were first opened to scholars. For a long time historians used them primarily to study either the workings of the Inquisition itself, or subjects such as the impact of inquisitorial activities on cultural developments, or the fortunes of persecuted religious minorities. But in recent decades, a growing number of historians have come to appreciate that the Inquisition records, which by their nature are voluminous, constitute a treasure-trove of information about the lives and beliefs of men and women whose very names have been lost to history. The result has been a massive growth in what has come to be known as micro-history, which seeks to provide fresh insights into the past through the reconstruction of humble and forgotten lives.

This seems to me to provide a good indication of how, where a reasonable amount of evidence survives, the recovery of the past is as likely to be determined by the way in which that evidence is approached as by the discovery of additional

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sources of evidence. In other words, it is the insight of the historian, the ability to look at the sources in a new way and to ask of them previously unasked questions – sometimes by bringing to bear the insights of other disciplines, such as anthropology – that is critical for the advance, not only of historical knowledge but also for what is much more important – the advance of historical understanding.

What, then, is required for 'breaking the sound-barrier' of knowledge? The answer, it would seem to me, is a critical historical intelligence, and this in turn is the outcome of a historian's personality and of his or her historical experience. That experience is, of necessity, limited to the historian's own lifetime. This means that, however much historians may try to distance themselves from the present in their search for objectivity, they are always, in the last resort, the prisoners of the age in which they live, and the questions they ask of the evidence will be questions that reflect the interests, concerns and preoccupations of their own times. This creates both opportunities and limitations. The opportunities arise from seeing the past from a contemporary angle of vision, which offers new ways of looking at it and suggests new questions that await an answer. The limitations come from the fact that every historian remains essentially time-bound.

The reconstruction of the past thus proves to be a subjective process. Once the basic and most elementary facts of a historical situation have been established – the date on which an event took place, the names of those who participated in it – the evocation and recreation of the circumstances surrounding that event will depend on the critical intelligence, the historical skills and the powers of imaginative reconstruction of the individual historian. The interpretation that is most likely to gain assent is that which can claim the most plausibility in terms of its truth to the available evidence and its ability to incorporate the different pieces of that evidence into a coherent and convincing whole. Those historians who can achieve this on a large scale, either through the deployment of a new methodology or by reassessing the whole range of the evidence by subjecting it to new interrogations and insights, have, in one way or another, succeeded in changing the historical landscape. In doing this, they point their contemporaries and successors in new and potentially rewarding directions.

This achievement might, I suppose, be described as a the achievement of a paradigm change. But every new paradigm is fated to be flawed. However much historians may seek a total reconstruction of a past event, or the history of an individual or a community, that reconstruction, by the nature of the enterprise itself, can only be partial. Too much of the past escapes our knowledge, too many variables come into play, and we are condemned to view the past through the distorting lens of the present, however conscious we may be of this and seek to compensate for it by introducing corrective measures. As a result, both of new evidence and new interpretations, historical knowledge has increased, is

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increasing, and will continue to increase. But historical understanding will advance on one front while retreating on another, as a particular aspect of the past is suddenly brought into sharper focus, while other aspects that were formerly clear become blurred in the process of refocusing.

This may seem to non-historians a formula for frustration. But it is really no more than a reflection of those 'complexities of the everyday world', of which Sir Martin Rees has spoken. It is the complexity and diversity of life itself – the sheer impossibility of viewing all the surfaces of the diamond simultaneously – that makes the task of the historian, for all its frustrations, both so challenging and so rewarding. Yet it does also raise difficulties, in particular as regards the second question that I posed at the start of this paper.

How far can the past be used?

The hope, and indeed the expectation, of lay society is that those with a specialist knowledge of the past will be able to predict the future. From all I have been saying, it will be obvious that this hope is doomed to disappointment. The complexity of the past – the fact that no situation ever exactly repeats itself, and that responses to challenges will vary over time and place – rules out all possibility of firm prediction. It is possible to say that certain circumstances have, in the past, led to revolution, and may well, if repeated, do so in the future. But there is no guarantee that this will happen, and the preconditions of revolution that led to actual revolution in France in 1789 or Russia in 1917, may well prove not to be the preconditions of revolution when reproduced elsewhere.

What use, then, if any, is historical knowledge? Its predictive power, as I have suggested, is severely limited. At the best, it is possible to say that if a politician does this or that, certain consequences may follow, on the strength of past experience. But historians are not prophets, and the use to society of historical knowledge lies not in what it can tell us about the future, but what it can tell us about the past itself.

This may seem obvious enough, but I think it is of immense importance. Historians are the guardians of collective memory, but at the same time they are also, or should be, the questioners of collective memory. Such memory, as we all know, can easily be falsified and distorted, and the past is always in danger of becoming fossilized. For example, a society can become fixated on a particular interpretation of its past, and hand it down from one generation to the next. An obvious example is provided by nationalist historiography, which not infrequently casts a society or a people in the role of permanent victim.

This occurred with a society whose past I once explored, that of Catalonia. Catalonia's national day was, and remains, that now most notorious of dates, 11 September. It was chosen in the 19th century in mournful remembrance of the

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surrender of Barcelona to the army of Philip V of Spain on 11 September 1714, and the incorporation of Catalonia into a centralized Spanish state. My own work was concerned with a previous Catalan rebellion against the government in Madrid, just over half a century earlier. This, too, had tended to be interpreted in terms of victimization by an alien and hostile neighbour, Castile. My researches into the vast amount of surviving documentary evidence revealed, not surprisingly, a much more complex picture than the one painted by traditional nationalist historiography in terms of villains and victims. My findings may not have met with universal acceptance, but at least they have had to be taken into account in all subsequent discussions of the rebellion whose causes I was seeking to unravel.

I use this personal example because it may help to illustrate the points I want to make: first, that a historian, by approaching the evidence from a new standpoint, and bringing new questions to bear, can produce an alternative, and perhaps more plausible, interpretation of events than the one currently predominant. This itself extends the range both of historical knowledge and of historical understanding. Secondly, that the adducing of such an alternative interpretation is itself salutary, in that, by challenging the received wisdom, it creates new possibilities.

The constraints on historical knowledge, as I have suggested, are tight, and the uses of historical knowledge are limited. It can, as with certain forms of nationalist historiography, be both deleterious and dangerous if it ties a society too closely to a particular vision of its past. However, in producing alternative interpretations to received views of the past, historians also have it in their power to change the present, by suggesting the existence of paths not taken – paths that may yet have a future. It is by renewing their sense of the past that societies renew themselves. And this process of historical renewal, at least, is one that knows no limits.

About the Author

Sir John Elliott was Regius Professor of Modern History, Oxford University 1990–97 and was at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton 1973–90. His special interest has been in the history of Spain and the Hispanic world. His many books include *Spain and its World* (1989); *The Count-Duke of Olivares: The Statesman in an Age of Decline* (1986) and *Richelieu and Olivares* (1984). He received the Balzan Prize in 1999.

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