Of Doubt, Systematic and Methodical

Shamil Jeppie

Jan Vansina, "The Power of Systematic Doubt," *History in Africa* 1 (1974), 109–127, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171764.

There is much to choose from over the forty years of this journal. A lot has changed in Africa in the discipline of history as conceived and taught in Africa and especially in the academies of the US and Europe. This journal reflects many of these changes over the years. How to choose a single article of significance is not an easy matter but I chose one that I read many years after its publication – nearly two decades afterwards, in fact – and since that first reading I have thought it requires closer reading and reflection. I was impressed and intrigued by the sheer seriousness, rigour and confidence with which it made its case. The illustrative case material was impressively detailed for an article about method. I think I got the main points and wondered whether it would be possible to take its lessons and advice and apply it in any current work I was busy with or future work I may embark on. Alas, neither materialised. The programme it sets out is demanding and idealistic. It assumes a singled-mindedness, research time, and resources that perhaps only groups of researchers over in the Science Faculty have access to. Perhaps it is really unrealisable, and given the way disciplines in the social sciences and humanities have been unfolding since then, it did not and will probably not find ardent followers now. Yet, it is an important and necessary document and worthy of many readings and critiques.

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What is the point? It asserts that the historian has to address the evaluation of sources but beyond this has a larger ambition to reconstruct the past, make plausible interpretations of the past, and offer "historical synthesis." This is uncontroversial, of course. But it is based on an argument that takes off from the fact that it sees history as virtually a science. It is a view of history as a social science that emphasizes the "science" part. The scientific experimental method is the way to proceed: collecting data, using them for interpretation, casting doubt over the interpretation with more data in view and so on. The model is biology. Similarly the historian begins with an idea then proceeds with an experiment. Observation is followed by an hypothesis. Syllogistic logic is the form of the argument. The "experimental method" is the model and a rigorous programme of systematic interrogation or "empirical falsification" inspired by Karl Popper, the Austro-Anglo philosopher of science. Historians have to collect data which they interpret but they have to cast doubt over their own interpretations. Observation or description is only the beginnings for an hypothesis has to be formulated. It is an inductive process.

Jan Vansina is an advocate of a wide-ranging and thorough *interdisciplinarity* but which is driven by the objective of arriving at a valid historical argument. History cannot exist as a discipline without a whole range of other disciplines. This is not hard to disagree with at all. In fact it points to the pioneering role in interdisciplinarity that the study of African history has had. But this is only the start. The experimental method would not be scientific without the use of counterproofs and we are given ways of applying counterproofs to historical hypotheses in the essay.

It appears that this mode of historical practice did not catch on. The faith in history as a social *science* fell apart even while such notions were articulated by eminent scholars such as Vansina. Firstly, there were other ways of doing rigorous history that did not conform to this "scientific" model for even "hard science" had logics that did not fall into the Popperian mode. Through reading this article then one could go to the debates around Popper's philosophy itself, the various critiques of it and the more recent approaches to the philosophy of science including the attempts to bring more history and ethnography to scientific practice itself. Secondly, there was a fracturing of the discipline into numerous sub-fields**.** It was no longer plausible that there was one past that could be recovered through a painstaking process of logical positivistic examination of (oral and archival) sources. The widening of the discipline has in certain cases had its "postmodern" extravagances, but on the whole this has not been the case. With the multiplication of fields of research doubt and scepticism is necessary in every research programme, but the method and system proposed by Vansina would not allow anything to be written in the end.

Yet, this essay is worth close reading for its own sake. It represents the thinking of an important and influential historian and reflects what he was grappling with at that time. But it is also the basis for an extensive discussion

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about method and theory, areas of historiography that progressively gets less and less attention in university courses. Interdisciplinarity should be encouraged while the methodological issues it entails should not be placed aside. This article is a classic starting point in any such discussion.

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