

What challenges will future scholars face in writing the history of 2020?

The year 2020 will be studied for years to come as a great turning point. We saw the world suspended in chaos as a pandemic struck, democracy faltered and everywhere around the globe people's daily lives changed dramatically. Its ubiquitous influence will be felt for decades to come. Writing such significant history is no small feat, issues of objectivity, authorship and censorship have long been present in historical writing and 2020 is no exception. Furthered by a new technological and increasingly conscientious age, new problems will begin to arise. How will future historians choose who is most suited to writing the history of the Black Lives Matter movement? With an abundance of documentation and media, how will they select their evidence? As Technology brings about greater secrecy, how will we glean the more intimate perspectives of the inner workings of a politician? As is true with the past, the present is plagued with difficulties. And for future scholars, navigating these challenges will be far from simple.

To understand the challenges that future historians will have to undertake when writing 2020's history, one must first have an understanding of how any historical writing is achieved. Writing has been described as 'the foremost goal of history'¹ and is the tool historians utilise when presenting answers to an array of questions. It is the gathering of, the evaluation of and the presentation of facts. One of the key thinkers who considered the nature of history was E.H. Carr. In his book "What is history?"² he writes extensively on what historical writing is at its core. Taking inspiration from another author, Acton (1907), he describes it as "a unique opportunity of recording, in the way most useful to the greatest number" and notes on how it can be used to "show the point we have reached on the road from one to the other". He places particular weight on facts, emphasising how their manipulation can affect a person's perception on events. Take for example the fact 'anywhere from 6,900,000 to 7,400,000 Germans were killed in WW2'³. To someone who had not heard of the Second World War, they could think of little reasoning for such a horrific death toll. But when put into the context of other facts such as: 'The Germans were operating under a fascist regime that resulted in the partially successful mass extermination of a minority group', one might consider the former fact in a different light. As is the same with all of history, the facts chosen to memorialise 2020 will create vastly different narratives depending on their order and selection.

Furthermore, to gain a greater understanding of the unique nature of the challenges that 2020 presents, we must discuss what the underlying challenges of *general* historical writing are. For most, what first comes to mind is objectivity. Objectivity has been hotly debated for many years and by various historians. Passmore was key in developing this. In his 'Philosophy'⁴ he discusses how objectivity is based entirely on our standards and writes: "If objectivity of a form of inquiry depends upon the possibility of deducing its content a priori history must abandon all claims to objectivity". History is for the most part subjective, and authorship plays a significant part in how we understand certain aspects of it. This is a

¹ (Henkle)

² (Carr)

³ (World War II Casualties)

⁴ (Passmore)

problem inherent to history itself and will likely never be 'solved' so we must learn to live with subjectivity instead.

This subjectivity comes through most fervently with the aforementioned problem of authorship. This particular topic is already heavily present in the 21st century thinking. With an increase in gender, sexuality and race related movements (most notably in 2020 the Black Lives Matter movement) discussions surrounding who writes history have become all the more common. The fact that much of the history we learn is written and dictated by the 'Straight white man' has been heavily criticised. We can identify this at beginning in the 20th Century as "the great efflorescence of social and cultural history in the latter half of the twentieth century (where *who* gets to be an historian also played a major factor, as women began to enter the profession in much greater numbers)"⁵

We see this furthered in Edward Said's book 'Orientalism' (1978) as he began discussions on Western rhetoric's towards the 'Far East'. He writes on how the west 'invented' the East, defining the people and the culture while he himself was "careful not to speak for the silenced natives"⁶. This notion of "speaking for the silenced natives" has been crucial to the previously mentioned BLM movement. Oppressed minorities are beginning to reclaim their history as book recommendations of black, female, LGBTQIA+ and Jewish authors have been circulated through schools and the media. The idea of 'educating yourself' is ever present and doing so from sources written and dictated by those marginalised groups is becoming of great import. Therefore, when writing the turbulent but pivotal history of 2020, historians must consider authorship with the utmost importance. They must make the decision between embracing subjectivity or clinging to objectivity. However once again the idea of striving for objectivity may be futile. In Richard J. Evans' 'In Defence of History' ⁷ he discusses something particularly important when considering Carr's earlier work. He writes: "history books like the people who write them are products of their own times". Whatever the written history of 2020 will look like, it will be a "[a product of its own time]". Therefore, surely one would agree that if history is so influenced by those who write it, authorship should be taken by those who have the lived experience of a specific key historical event.

One could also take these matters to a more global scale. The pandemic has left no corner of the world unmarred and there has been a fierce competition over which countries have dealt with the situation the best. Thus, comes into play the notion of "History is written by the victors". This is of course, no new sentiment: It was popularised in the 20th Century by Winston Churchill⁸ and Herman Goring (who took a particularly emotive adaptation at his trial: "The victor will always be the judge, and the vanquished the accused"). However, it was seen appearing earlier in French (1843), Italian (1852) and English (1844) as well as being seen in an old African proverb⁹: "if the lion wrote history, the hunter would not be a hero". In short, this idea has been floating in historical thinking for centuries. It is then of no surprise that it could come through as a challenge to future historians. No country wishes to come out of the pandemic without a claim to excellence. With American, British and German vaccines, Indian innovation in faster testing and the efficacy of New Zealand's Lockdown; many countries lay claim to being essential for ending the pandemic. This will

⁵ (Arnold)

⁶ (Wood)

⁷ (Evans, Introduction)

⁸ (Phelan)

⁹ (Belmehdi)

most likely reflect in its history. As it is such a universal event there will be multiple competing histories of the progression of the pandemic depending on where each history was authored. The west will most likely try to paint itself saviours, Britain in competition with Germany and America as the East boasts of its strict and successful lockdowns. Poorer countries, especially those found in Africa will most likely be viewed as 'helpless' and the western saviour complex will once again come to the forefront. As there is no true universal history and each country teaches their own, there will be a wide array of victors acting the scribe. Facing this challenge, context will become essential to the future historian. Considering why certain countries did better than others, the efficacy of tactics and the vast difference in the pertaining political and economic positioning of each country when they were thrust into the pandemic will be key to constructing a less biased history.

Another challenge that frequents historical writing is the careful choosing of relevant facts. E.H. Carr¹⁰ writes extensively on this, distinguishing between facts of history and facts of the past. He believed that facts became historical once numerous historians place weight on them. He goes on to discuss older philosophical thinking on the formation of history, writing: "what had gone wrong was the belief in this untiring and unending accumulation of hard facts as the foundation of history, the belief that facts speak for themselves and that we cannot have too many facts, a belief at that time so unquestioning that few historians then thought it necessary". This is as significant in the 21st Century as it was at the time Carr wrote it in 1961. It was further emulated in 1997 in Evans's writing¹¹: "the materials left to us by the past are so extensive that all the historians who have ever worked have done little more than scratch the surface of the deposits which have accumulated and continue to accumulate over time". In both these examples we can see how the issue of selection is universal to historians. However, with the increase in documentation, the evidence available to modern historians is innumerable. Paired with an abundance of media and novel sources cropping up through new social medias and other outlets of political expression; discovering what is relevant and what is not is an impressive challenge.

Leading on from this, the technological age has presented unforeseen "digital gaps in the historical record"¹². Professor David Olusoga expressed these concerns as he discussed how an increase in the use of private messaging apps such as WhatsApp between policymakers and politicians could "leave future historians with much less understanding of how policies are made" as they could omit records of debates. He goes on to discuss how the notes 'left in the margins' by politicians such as Churchill have been essential tools for historians to hold those in power accountable to their deliberations. This increase in secrecy is simply a burgeoning threat on democracy. Thus, technology is one of the greatest changes, and threats, in the collection and selection of historical facts and will introduce increasing novel problems that future historians will have to face.

Lastly, one must consider one of the most critical aspects of historical writing. Its purpose. It serves to educate, inform and guide as well as shape the future years. In 'History after Hobsbawm: Writing the past for the 21st Century'¹³ John H. Arnold leads a discussion on how "the past has seemingly never mattered more". The book is centred around Hobsbawm

¹⁰ (Carr)

¹¹ (Evans, History, Science and Morality)

¹² (Coughlan)

¹³ (Arnold)

and provides an enlightening comparison between 20th and 21st century thinking. For Hobsbawm the question 'where shall we go' was answered with revolutionary socialism. He lived through a historical time rife with nationalism, inequality and poverty. The increasingly hostile situation around the globe led to well documented radicalism and for him the next steps were challenging the claims of nationalism. Although the pandemic may have led to an increase of isolationist policy, the principal purpose for 21st Century historical writing is far more concerned with social justice. From concerns of climate change and its disproportionate effect on socioeconomically disadvantaged people to the continued injustices acted against a wide number of marginalised communities. The 21st century has become accustomed to terms such as the new 'woke' generation where political activism is becoming increasingly common. Future historians will have to carefully balance context and narrative when portraying the need found in 2020 for social justice. 2020 in many ways has been a turning point and explaining how we arrived at this particular school of thinking will be of the utmost importance for historians to teach to future generations. Arnold explains this 'duty' of historians excellently when he writes: "historians *must* think about the implications of what they write, the wider societal and political frames within which their stories will be received and understood."¹⁴

Historians have the wonderful benefit of hindsight. As Passmore wrote: "the historian is in a much better position to know that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo than any participant in the battle could be".¹⁵ This same thinking can easily be applied to 2020. One can guess as to which problems may plague future historians, but in the end, it is those with hindsight who have the privilege of understanding key events in a far wider context. For now, however, the challenges identified show a clear running theme that will be essential in the future of historical writing. Our world is growing ever more conscientious and the morality of the way we write history will continue to be explored. Authorship, fact selection and purpose will be continually questioned and as the history of the world develops these factors will shift to fit the times. Writing the history of 2020 will be challenging, but if done right may result in a great new age of justly subjective writing that will allow, no matter the culture, all stories to be told.

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¹⁴ (Arnold)

¹⁵ (Passmore)

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