‘Limiting the Authority of Historical Knowledge’: 
Postmodern Critique of ‘Historicism’ and ‘History’

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Abstract
The postmodern discourse on the nature of knowledge is constructed on 
the authority and reliability which different forms of knowledge claim in 
various walks of life. This discourse has challenged the major formations 
of modernity, claiming a sort of objective, authentic and reliable 
knowledge in comparison with non-evidential forms of knowledge such as 
arts, literature and revelation. ‘Historical Knowledge’ in the form of 
‘historicism’ and ‘history’ is considered fundamental embodiment of 
modernity. The paper deals with the question what are the major 
elements of postmodern critique of ‘historical knowledge’ and how it 
challenges the authority claimed by ‘historical knowledge’. Focus on the 
discourse shall help us understand the place of ‘history’ in now current 
space of knowledge.

Key Words: Postmodernism; Historical Knowledge; History; Historicism; Modernity.

I. Introduction
‘Historical knowledge’ is considered one of three major sources of knowledge, 
along with reason and revelation. It has given birth to ‘the discipline of history’ or what is 
called ‘historical sciences’ in modern academics.(Marwick, pp.247-250) However, the 
status of ‘historical knowledge’ as well as ‘the discipline of history’, on the scale of 
reliability of knowledge, has been one of the most debated issues in the twentieth century 
philosophical, literary and academic discourse. One school of historians has claimed that 
‘historical knowledge’ is ‘objective’ in its nature; therefore, it is a science and is reliable 
like a scientific fact (Ibid). However, theological, rational philosophical and linguistic 
debate has challenged this claim. Theological school gives preference to ‘revealed 
knowledge’ and marginalises the reliability of all other sources of knowledge. Rational 
philosophy focuses on ‘ahistorical’ reason. Linguistic philosophy believes in the textual 
interpretative nature of ‘historical knowledge’.(Lemon, pp.28-270) The application of 
postmodern theory to this discourse has sharpened the challenged posed to the nature 
and authority of ‘historical knowledge’ and discipline of history.(Southgate, passim) The 
purpose of this paper is to understand and analyse postmodern standpoint in this 
discourse. It evolves around the theme that postmodernism challenges those claims of 
authority which are constructed on the basis of ‘historical knowledge’ and are ultimately 
used to determine the course of human development for the future by the historicists and 
historians. In this context, postmodern criticism of ‘historical knowledge’ brings to light 
some limits to the claims of authority based on ‘historical knowledge’ through an
analysis of compatibility of ‘historical knowledge’ in relation to other forms of knowledge, especially, imaginative.

As ‘historical knowledge’ has produced a popular and one of the most influential philosophical trend of ‘historicism’ and has evolved modern discipline of history, therefore, the understanding of postmodern critic of ‘historical knowledge’ require the understanding of critic of ‘historicism’ and the ‘discipline of history’. An historical analysis of the place of ‘historical knowledge’ helps determine its place in modern theory of knowledge.

II. ‘Historical Knowledge’, Modernity and Historicism

Traditionally, ‘historical knowledge’ is considered the knowledge ‘produced’ ‘about the past’. (Marwick, p.xiii ) Foucault believes that ‘…All knowledge is rooted in a life, a society, and a language that have a history; and it is in that very history that knowledge finds the elements enabling it to communicate with other forms of life, other types of society, other significations…’. (Foucault, 1972, p.372) This ‘essential’ nature of history for human society not only generates ‘historical knowledge’, but also makes it an essential part of discourse of authority of knowledge. During the medieval times, historical knowledge was either subject to rational philosophy or subordinate to theology as a helping tool or evidence. However, by the emergence of modernity out of deistic rationalism of enlightenment in the nineteen th century, ‘historical knowledge’ became a major claimant of authority. Its authority became so widespread that it has been considered the most suitable tool, method and technique for the evaluation of authenticity of rational and theological hypotheses. The concept of modernity, generally, is believed to be constructed on the basis of natural philosophy, scientific method and objective and universal values and laws. The relation of the concept of modernity with ‘historical knowledge’ has produced two basic results: the emergence of ‘historicism’ and the emergence of the discipline of history.

‘Historicism’ is a term which is applied to the behaviour and method of solving the current problems and ‘forecast the future on the basis of …experience of past [historical knowledge]’. (Condorcet, 1955, p.173) Following the theme Karl Popper (Popper, 1986, passim) considers historicism as a ‘philosophy which claims to predict the course of human history on the basis of past behaviour’. (Hamilton, 1996, p.17) That is, for Foucault ‘…why historicism always implies a certain philosophy, or at least a methodology, of living comprehension…of inter human communication…’. In this sense it implies the objective and universal values of modernity and science to ‘historical knowledge’, which led to the derivation of deterministic value of course of history. The philosophers not only began to determine the trends emerging out of historical evidences from the past, but also began to determine the course of future on the basis of historical knowledge. Two best examples of this understanding emerge in the form of works of Hegel (1770-1831) and Karl Marx (1818-1883) who produced theories of dialectical historicism. (White, 1973) The later half of nineteenth century and the first half of twentieth century produced a substantial set of knowledge on this basis.

Widening of the scope of ‘historical knowledge’ by the popularity of historicism led to the emergence of ‘history’ as an academic discipline. Established on the concepts such as fact, evidence, objectivity, progress, evolution and development, the discipline claimed to be discovering basic knowledge from the past to provide ‘lessons’ for the
future of mankind. That is the ground for the historians’ and history’s claim of authority to knowledge. ‘Historical facts’ with, in most of the methodologies, a linear approach of single thread of causation between the facts, form the base of this authority. This methodology was supposed to be scientific, objective and universal, providing access to universal laws same as those of natural and mechanical sciences. Following the claims of modernity, historians began to find laws in the process of history, a centre oriented linear mechanical concept of progress or historical evolution working behind the occurring in the universe, on the bases of scientific law. Therefore, a wide circle of modern historians claimed rather believed that history is ‘a science, no more, no less’. (Marwick, 241) It evolves around the presupposition that history concerns with factual presentation of past and these facts can sharply be distinguished from the fictional as well as from the mythological and spiritual usurpers. The founding father of modern Western methodology and discipline of history, Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) claimed that as a historian he had turned ‘history’ away from fiction and resolved to keep strictly to the facts. (Lemon, 2003) Since Ranke’s time professional historians have had rules and procedures that enable them to make distinction between facts and fiction. The modernist scientific historians not only challenged the level of authenticity of revealed knowledge, but also questioned the possibilities of impracticability of rational logic. This context made ‘historical knowledge’ an embodiment of modernity and scientism in the form of discipline of history. Therefore, it has to face the burden of criticism to modernity and history, both considered to be based on historicism. Two types of challenges ‘historical knowledge’ seems to be facing in this context: First, postmodernists’ attacks on the philosophy based on the historical method and knowledge; Second, linguists denial of the status of history as an independent discipline, making it subject to linguistic philosophy.

III. Postmodernism and Historicism

Postmodernism emerge as an intellectual attitude focusing the aspects of modernity other than those which claim a scientific and objective nature of institutional knowledge. Arnold Joseph Toynbee, who introduced this term in the post Second World War (1939-1945) socio-political analysis, used it to point out the absurdity, relativism, irrationality and anxiety nourishing within the claims of universality of values and laws discovered by modern scientific approach to knowledge. (Malik, p.1). The postmodernist do believe that modernity in socio-political perspective was ‘historicist turn’. The nineteenth century philosophy of history, propagating the universal and deterministic laws and values working behind the process of history, and the emergence of the disciple of history to strengthen the claims of objective and scientific ‘historical knowledge’, are used as evidences of historicism’s fundamental role in the development of nineteenth century concept of modernity. Therefore, historicism has to face a major burden of postmodern criticism. In this context, two works of linguistic and rational philosophy, H. G. Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* and Karl Popper’s *Poverty of Historicism* potentially represent this criticism.

H.G. Gadamer is of the view that historicism was not an attack on, but, on the contrary, a new culminating point in the history of the enlightened ‘modernistic’ program. He considers historical consciousness and historicism a continuation of the tradition of eighteenth century enlightenment which held the view that context is slight and may in principle be overcome as it is similar to universal forms of thought and experience. It argued that individuals perceive themselves with the beliefs universally and un-historically prevalent. (Collindwood, 1998, p. 179) This view of western
enlightenment was revised with a wide spread nineteenth century romantic view of historical variability and context dependence of thought. Historicism challenged this view with the thesis that enlightened thought neglect the problem of anachronism and context neglects the concept of continuity and change or what is called historical process. The historicists believed that they had overcome this attitude and were able to approach the past in presuppositionless way, in terms of continuous and integrated process.

H. G. Gadamer while not wholly denying the reality of historical consciousness (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 230-240) was of the opinion that historicism has overestimated the extent to which context-dependence may be overcome and it has continued to ascribe a privileged position to the present. It holds a sort of identity which fails to integrate itself with the past. It assumes that classical texts and remote past contain peculiar views which lack any relevance to the current society. (Gadamer, 1976, p.8) In this context, claims to truth or ‘historical knowledge’ Gadamer sees as mediated by their authors’ context-dependant contemporary presuppositions and thus disregarded. Rather than taking past as a dialogue, historicism attempts to uncover presuppositions and attempts to dismiss claims to truth. Historicism represents the plurality and change as a form of context dependant which unduly affects the knowledge claims. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 484) Contrarily, historicism challenges the contextual knowledge and tries to establish universal and objective values on the basis of speculation. Therefore, Gadamer challenges this claim of objective understanding of what is working behind the events in the past and represents it as a ‘hermeneutical situation’. He writes:

[The] consciousness of being affected by history is primarily the consciousness of hermeneutical situation. To acquire an awareness of a situation is, however, always a task of peculiar difficulty…. We always find ourselves in a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished…the illumination of this situation-reflection on effective history-can never be completely achieved. (Gadamer, 1976, pp.301-2)

That is how Gadamer rejects the Historicians’ claims of objectivity of ‘aprior’ and considers history a speculative and not factual present.

The Gadamerian criticism of historicism is confirmed and expanded by Karl Popper (1902-1994). Challenging the objective and authoritarian nature of speculative philosophy of history with the concept of the fundamental contribution of philosopher’s presupposition to the derivation of claims of objectivity and universality, he writes: ‘…I do admit that at any moment we are prisoners caught in the framework of our theories, our expectations; our past experiences, our language. But we are prisoners in Pickwickian sense: if we try, we can break out of our framework any time….’(Lakatos, 1970, p. 56) In this way, Popper challenges the universality of historical knowledge and processes achieved through speculation. However, accepting the validity of tradition, he stresses on the critical appreciation of the tradition to differentiate between historical processes and universal laws. He writes:

Quantitative and qualitative by far the most important source of our knowledge-apart from inborn knowledge—is tradition…. The fact that most of the sources of our knowledge are traditional condemns anti-traditionalism as futile. But this fact must not be taken to support a traditionalist attitude: every bit of our traditional knowledge …is open to critical examination and may be overturned. (Popper, 1989, p.238)
In this way, Popper asserts that any part of background knowledge, which Gadamer considers as presupposition and forestructure, can be challenged and fundamental aspects of background knowledge may be overthrown at any time.

IV. Postmodernity and the Discipline of History

As discipline of history came into existence out of an interaction between historicism and modernity, therefore, the Gadamerian and the Popperian form of critic of historicism and laws and philosophy derived out of a straightforward combination of facts become mechanically applied to the discipline of history. That is why most of the problems of postmodernism are more specifically concerned with history, especially in relation to the concept of ‘facts’, on which historical studies rely. Theorists like Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, and Hans Kellner have sharply criticised the nature, structure and claims of the discipline of history and historiography, which is followed by a large bread of postmodernists. The major part of this criticism challenges the claim of objectivity of ‘historical knowledge’ through a methodology of comparing historical facts with literary narratives.

Friedrich Nietzsche’s criticism of modernity and history provides foundation to Postmodernity. Challenging the claim of modernity that it provides ‘scientific and objective knowledge’, he believed that although modern historiography claimed to be ‘objective’, but in fact it is self-indulgent and this character of modern historiography should be exposed. He condemned all claims to objective history and declared that he knows nothing of anything which is called ‘objective’. (Nietzsche, 1969, p.158) It is feared that this sort of claim to historiography eliminates ‘the research for truth as the main task of historian’. (Southgate, passim)

The ideas of Nietzsche are further interpreted by his disciple Michael Foucault. For Foucault, historians are misguided in the application of scientific assumptions to history and resultant belief in ‘objectivity, the accuracy of facts, and the permanence of past’. They claim to efface their own persona and values, to replace it with ‘the fiction of universal geometry’. He believes that historians have neglected that in practice no one can erase all personal inputs from their historical understanding. Any attempt to remove such biases by itself reveals the ideological commitments as well as alignment with what are his presuppositions. In this context, everything can be reduced to comprehensible purpose and there is nothing which cannot be assimilated into a historical narrative. It indicates ‘insensitivity to the most disgusting things’. (Cahoone, p.372) On the same model, criticizing the historians’ claims of scientific and objective historiography, Ralf Waldo Emerson was of the opinion that: ‘…History and the state of the world at any one time directly depend on the intellectual classification then existing in the mind of the men. That is why we can’t get out of our orientation and paradigm we are living in and we have accepted in order to make our lives purposive’. (Emerson, 1913, p. 166)

A contemporary of these intellectuals, Joseph Conard adopted almost same approach towards the discipline of history. He was of the opinion that the world is not consist of ‘straightforward facts’ which historians believe and use to derive their conclusions and philosophy of history. (Conard, 1999, p.41) This problem of ‘straightforward facts’ and persona/subjective nature of history are further explored by a number of post modern critiques. Keith Jenkins believes ‘our chosen way of seeing things lack
foundation’. History too is an ‘abstract metaphysical construction’. Therefore, it challenges the concept of identities. (Bauman, 1997, p. 87)

Commenting on the narrative structure of history, Southgate endorses Jenkins’ belief that parts of the past are inevitably ignored or excised in the interest of a historical narrative. A narrative is basically a story, which one chooses to impose upon the past, to make some appeal to senses. By implanting the past in a story, the author necessarily chooses what he thinks fit in his narrative and what is not. However, it leads to what the author wants his reader to remember and what not, what we are going to include in, and what exclude from history. Historians apply their coherent understanding to the chaotic and absurd historical facts and situations, interpreting them in accordance with the earlier accounts and the current expectations, making it internally coherent to draw conclusions. They impose a time scale and ensure that some meaning is drawn from their collections and editing of facts. (Southgate, p.55)

This postmodern discourse on the nature and authority of ‘historical knowledge’ is used by the linguistic philosophers to eliminate the historians’ claims of superiority as producers of objective knowledge and to abolish the distinction between historical facts and literary fiction. Hayden White denies any possibility of keeping fact and fiction separate from each other. He believes that as past has no intrinsic meaning, therefore, historians have a choice of how to employ the traces of past. Their choice depends on what sort of message they want to convey. History is imposed by historians and therefore constitutes a composition which includes the elements of their subjective will. The historians’ concerns are same as that of a novelist presenting a story. (White, 1973) The attempts to ‘fill in’ or ‘reconstruct’ the gaps in available information from the past also reflect writers’ perceptions and influences. Therefore, Hayden White seriously claimed that ‘history was a form of ‘rhetoric’. Linda Hutcheon believes that ‘both history and fiction are discourses ‘human construct’ and ‘signifying systems’ concerned with the imposition of meaning. (Berkhofer, 1997, p.67)

The most of the critiques have used the personal objectives, claims or concepts of historians and positivist intellectuals to point out the problems with the discipline of history. One group of postmodernist have used August Comte’s view of history as founding father of the positivist theory of knowledge as an evidence of an imperfect status of historical knowledge. August Comte believed that history should have a purpose outlook. It should be confined ‘to the elite vanguard of humanity comprising the greater part of white race or the European nations’ or ‘to the development of most advanced people’. He believed that ‘parts of the world or the centres of civilization whose evolution has so far been, for some cause or other, arrested at a more imperfect stage’ should not be dealt with by the historians. The places which had not ‘exercised any real influence on our past’, such as India and China, should not be given any attention as it was a ‘puerile and inept display of sterile, ill-directed erudition’. (Burn, 2000, p.115) In the same way, many other historians thought the study of Asian and Indian history as wastage of time.

V. Conclusion

The postmodern denial of the status of ‘historical knowledge’ as ‘objective knowledge’ and its critique of the capacity of ‘historical knowledge, to generate a universal philosophy of history, has not only challenged the modern structure of
knowledge rather has established new parameters for its evaluation. The elimination of distinction between fact and fiction or history and literature and propagation of history as ‘docudrama’ (a dramatic form of literature constructed on documents), meta-history and meta-narrative has generated the idea of abolition of history as an academic discipline. Some late twentieth century postmodernist works has refused to assign ‘history’ an independent place in the postmodern scheme of academic disciplines. Explaining the condition of postmodernity in 1989, David Harvey did not included history into the postmodernists concern. In his opinion, postmodern concerns were more linked with claims to possibilities by interpretative disciplines such as ‘art, literature, social theory, psychology, and philosophy’. Even Architecture and Urban Design have been mentioned as sharing the concern of possibilities with the postmodernism. But a discipline claiming his concern with objectivity or truth such as history has found no place in this perspective. (Harvey, 1989, p. 98) Charles Jencks claimed in 1992 that postmodernism was ‘embracing all areas of culture’, including literature, art, architecture, film, sociology, politics, geography, feminism, science and religion. However history fails to find a space in this categorization or taxonomy of knowledge. (Jencks, 1992) In the same way The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought, the cultural context of postmodernism is focused on, but history fails to find a space in this scheme of fields for knowledge. (Sim, 1998)

The challenge to the independent status of ‘historical knowledge’ has widened the scope of literature in two ways. On the one hand, linguists and literates have expanded their claims to ‘historical knowledge’ through the production of ‘Docudrama’ and ‘historiographic metafiction’ for the erosion of boundaries between history and fiction. (Patocka, 1996) On the other hand, linguists have adopted the linear and objective approach of historiography. (Said, 1978) Simultaneously, influenced by this debate a large group of historians has very strongly taken up the literary view of history in which historiography emerges more a linguistic effort than a factual. Raising the question of historiography’s ‘lack of autonomy’, F. R. Ankersmit is of the view that it has ‘always depended on what happened outside’ and has ‘ordinarily limited itself to the application to the domain of historical thought of insights that had already been gained elsewhere’. (Ankersmit, 1990, p. 275) Adopting this view, a number of historians have joined the academic departments such as Postcolonial Studies, Drama and Literature, rather than seeking career with the departments of history. The trend has made the writings of nineteenth century English writers such as Walter Scot (1771-1832), Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), T. B. Macaulay (1800-1859) and G. M. Trevelyan (1876-1962) models for bringing to narration the subtle aspects of life more properly than an historian. In this context, Foucault advised historians to abandon the godly claims and concede their own purposive involvement and commitment to the writing of history.

The debate and views have generated a sort of ‘ontological insecurity’ among the scientific historians and they have begun to feel to be ‘under siege’. Rather than accepting Foucault’s advice of abandoning godly claims, the discipline of history has responded to the postmodern criticism through the incorporation of postmodern themes within the claims of the discipline of history. The current themes of ‘historical knowledge’ or historicism seem to be essentially a synthesis of discourse developed by postmodern historians some thirty years ago. It is drawn on the earlier works in literary criticism in order to develop an argument that historical discourse is based largely upon earlier explanatory patterns, formulaic narratives and established vocabulary. This
assumption has been applied to the expansion and decentralization of the approaches to ‘historical knowledge’ in the form of peripheral, alternate, subaltern, social and cultural histories. The same theme has provided history a new outlook with the introduction of new disciplines of history and philosophy of history such as ‘History of Arts’, ‘History of Science’, ‘Cultural History’ and ‘Philosophy of History of Science’ and ‘Philosophy of History of Religion’. On the other hand, scientific or modernist historians have refused to accept the linguistic study of historiography on the ground that the postmodernists have not been able to distinguish between the imagination and speculation and between facts and fiction. The question of difference between a narration based on historical records and a narration based on extra-evidential imagination seems still to be providing strength to the ‘historical knowledge’ and ‘new historicism’. Therefore, the discipline of history and historicism or philosophy of history has survived in spite of a mass scale postmodern criticism.

References


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