

BIAS IN HISTORY TEACHING [Lecture notes by W.F. Monk, 1949]

1. To begin with the problem of Bias itself. As currently used this seems to me little more than a term of abuse, which we apply to other people but not to ourselves. Even when we confess to (say) a Conservative or an economic bias we don't mean that we think it a bias; we only mean that a supposed norm of social opinion might consider it a deviation from its orthodoxy, or that our hearer or hearers (constituting our immediate social milieu) might consider it as such.

I, personally, would side with Aristotle in thinking that all men must be understood to seek the Good. They do so according to their lights. These lights are often dim, and, to our mind, distorted, and men, though never willing or able to cast aside their lights and exchange them for unfamiliar ones, are seldom reluctant to try to improve the ones they possess. We can't hope to convert our neighbour from the promptings or in our mind "bias" of his nature. What we can do is to help him clean his glasses.

2. It is at this point that our argument brings us into the province of the teacher. The ultimate function of the teacher surely is not to teach but to educate: to enable the child to develop his innate capacities as fully as possible inside a given social and physical environment. In practice the formal process of education – actually a very small part of real education – will be carried out either by one teacher exercising a variety of offices or, more likely and desirably, by a number of different teachers dividing their labour. In Education as a whole, there will be what one might perhaps be termed a Bias towards fitting the child for the kind of society he is expected to have to live in, i.e. training of some sort of Citizenship.

Among the different teachers it ought, I believe, to be possible to distinguish the teacher or teachers of Citizenship and the teacher or teachers of history even when, as may tend to be the case, both functions are performed by the same person. Even if we admit that Society will, and ought to, insist on education being biased towards the current conception of good citizenship, we ought I think at the same time to insist on Society permitting some studies to be made as far as possible for their own sake if only because, paradoxically, by being so studied they seem to best serve the purpose of Society. It is easy to see how this works out in the case of Science or Mathematics, pure and applied. It should not be less easy to see the need to do the same in the case of the social sciences whose material is never man as he is or may be, but always man as he has been in the Past, that is to say, History.

3. This brings us, at last, to the subject of History and History Teaching. Just as everybody seeks the Good (according to his lights), so also I believe everybody seeks the Truth, including the Truth about the Past, which is History. Students and teachers of History may be presumed to have a special interest and competence in this. Nevertheless they would be the first to recognize their own inadequacy. The historian is inevitably influenced in his view of the Past by e.g. his view of the Nature of the Present. People are by nature not Whigs or Tories, Capitalists or Socialists, but innovators or conservatives, adventurers or planners. This cannot but affect their picture of past controversies and so-called facts. But

who is to say why it should not? Into what perspective must we force our historical vision?

Before what tribunal must we plead our historical causes for final judgement? Differences over imponderables, over values, are the very stuff of History as they are of Life. It is only when past controversies have lost all real meaning for us, have become, indeed, dead, that we sometimes achieve what we are pleased to call impartial agreement about their nature (although I can't think of an example of this). In the settled Victorian days of Samuel Rawson Gardiner there may have seemed a chance of such agreement about the Stuarts and their Parliaments; but rise of Marxist theory and Socialist practice has dispelled all present danger of that.

A local and temporary agreement may similarly be achieved as the result of the rise to predominance in the educational world of e.g. a school of historians, who co-opt one another by the various methods at their disposal; but they, in their turn, must inevitably pass with the social forces that gave them birth. No. Finality can never be reached in the realm of historical judgement; the most that can result is the better founding of individual judgements and attitudes as a consequence of deeper research into the materials of history, which such difference of opinion encourages.

If this analysis is correct, it must next be asked, What is the sense of seeking the Truth about the Past if all our judgments are necessarily biased? In a recent conference with German historians I could not fail to be struck by their sense of despair on this point. Not only did they tend to accept that History was all lies, but they went on from that to argue that it was the historian's duty to admit the fact and instead of futilely seeking Truth, to employ his art deliberately for immediate social purposes. Where Hitler, for example, had distorted history for his purposes, they thought it the duty of German democrats to use History as their principal weapon.

For them the problem was urgent, and they had no confidence in any atmosphere favourable to "purer" historical study ever growing up, unless they compromised with "purist" principles now. It is clear, I think, that our attitude to History is likewise a social function; and we ought not therefore to be too critical of our German neighbours. They feel that the conditions of their Society do not permit of their even trying to seek the Truth. But surely this does not hold with us, at any rate to the same extent. We do not deliberately act, as we believe, badly, simply because we are not sure how to act well. We do our best. Similarly, surely, in our pursuit of the Truth about the Past. England is not yet so distressed that we have to employ the history lesson as a vehicle to purvey, deliberately, propaganda on behalf of socialist or capitalist democracy, or whatever the current social need may seem to be. Quite the contrary, surely. Biased the historian must inevitably be as I have suggested, by his view of the nature of the Present, but his realization of this fact need not lead him to compromise his integrity as historian. If this kind of bias is incurable, and really, as it is the stuff of History, it seems silly to give it so harsh a name; there is surely another kind of bias that is curable, and it is against this alone that the Teacher of History, it seems to me, ought to be on his guard.

I have already suggested the nature of this Bias properly so-called. It exists in Germany, but it also exists in this country. It consists, consciously or unconsciously, in using the history lesson as a means to some conscious social purpose, instead of preserving it, as far as possible, like pure Mathematics or pure Science as an end in itself.

Such Bias takes many forms. I have observed it recently in myself. Recognizing that most boys who go on to do Science after their School Certificate examination, are deplorably ignorant of the immediate background of the World they live in, I recently decided that they should give up studying the Tudors and Stuarts in favour of the Nineteenth Century, and instead of studying the Crusades, they should do American History – for the School Certificate. At first glance, this may seem a very venial instance of Bias. I suppose it is. And yet, for that very reason I should like to use it as a test case.

Is it my aim as a Teacher of History to give children a social background which will fit them to be good citizens of 1949, or is it my aim simply to help them seek the Truth about the Past? I have only to ask what we should think, looking back, of the 18th Century History Teacher who sought to produce, not honest enquirers, but believers in Laissez-faire capitalism; to say nothing of what we think of our Totalitarian neighbours. My job is to be a Teacher of History primarily, and Teacher only secondarily. In seeking the Truth about the Past for its own sake, I shall incidentally be serving a social purpose which I could not serve if I sought it directly – I shall be developing that side of the citizen's nature which impels him to seek Truth for its own sake, and thereby to find personal values and a personal perspective which will give him some outside measure, however inadequate, against which to weigh the present. The Tudors and Stuarts and the Crusades may well not satisfy the Idealist, but at any rate they would afford a better historical training than the Nineteenth Century or the United States of America. Needless to say, there are more obvious forms of curable Bias against which a little thinking would enable even the most perverse amongst us to guard eg:

That [?] history should be largely ignored;

Idea of Progress;

Lines of Development to the Present, rather than rounded Periods: both are needed.

World History in terms of Hellenic - Western History

Maxims for the Teacher of History.

Try (You can do no more than that) to teach History for the sake of finding out the Truth about the Past, and not for some, necessarily ephemeral, present purpose. If we try to do that the element of Bias will fall into place as a fact about the Present as well as the Past, a fact of Human Nature, which it is the problem of History to convey.