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The Politics of Theorising in Historical Reconstruction: An Examination of the Views of the Protagonists and Antagonists

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Abstract

The significance of theory in research has made the formulation and use of theories a common practice in most fields of study, particularly in the natural sciences and in some social sciences. In history, however, there is a lack of unanimity regarding the formulation and application of theories in the reconstruction of the past. Thus, whereas some historians accept and employ theoretical formulations in their studies, others reject and avoid them altogether in their works. Interestingly, both camps have raised strong arguments in support of their positions. To understand the opposing camps, therefore, necessitates a thorough appraisal of their views. Accordingly, this paper, employing the multi-disciplinary approach, first distinguishes between the 'pro-theorists' and the 'anti-theorists'[1] in historical studies. It then examines in detail two of the important arguments the two schools of thought have advanced in relation to formulating and applying theories in the study and reconstruction of the past. Finally, the paper attempts to contribute towards resolving this somewhat controversial issue in the historical theatre by way of permitting itself the luxury of stating its own views on the matter. It concludes that to help make historical studies more scientific and easily intelligible, theories should be applied, with utmost caution, in historical research.

Key Words and Phrases: Formulation, Framework, Historical phenomena, Historical reconstruction, Theory, Anti-theorists, Pro-theorists, Presentism

Introduction

A theory may be conceived from two perspectives, internal and external. At the internal level, a theory may be considered as a statement that explains or describes how the internal part of natural or cultural phenomena works or operates. To the natural sciences, for example, a theory may be defined as a well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world. It is a law of nature that purports to be nothing more than a statement of what occurs, or will happen, given certain initial conditions. In the general sense, however, a theory may be defined as an organised system of accepted knowledge that applies in a variety of situations. It also may be defined as a generalised, systematic, and economical description of the relationship that exists among a number of facts or data found within a delimited area of empirical phenomena (Storer, 1966: 11). In yet another sense, it can be explained as a set of facts, propositions, or principles analysed in their relation to one another and used to explain phenomena in scientific studies. In simple terms, however, a theory is an organised set of principles that is designed to explain and predict the relationship existing between some facts (Storer, 1966: 11). At the external level, a theory may be defined as an image, a picture or a representation of reality, or what there really is. Stephen W. Hawking (1989: 10), for example, maintains that since a theory is just a model of the universe, or a restricted part of it, and a set of rules that relate quantities in the model to observations that researchers make, it (theory) exists only in our mind and does not have any other reality." In this sense, a theory is a mental picture, or idealisation, founded on physical concepts and aesthetic notions that accounts for what scientists see regarding a particular phenomenon (Evans, 2010, http://physics.gmu.edu/~jevans/astr103/CourseNotes/science_theoriesInScience.html).

There are different types of theory,[2] and whether viewed from the inside or the outside, theories are very significant in research work. For example, theories help provide solutions to problems that interest

[1] For the purpose of this study, we have chosen to refer to those in favour of the formulation and application of theories in historical reconstruction as the pro-theorists and their camp as pro-theory, and those against them as the anti-theorists and their school as anti-theory. These designations have been accorded and used arbitrarily only for our present purpose without resorting to any rules.

[2] Theories may be put into two broad categories, namely philosophical and scientific. Theories whose subject matter consists not in empirical data, but rather in ideas are in the realm of philosophical theories. In scientific usage, the term *theory* is reserved for explanations of phenomena which meet some basic requirements about the kinds of empirical observations made, the methods of classification used, and the consistency of the theory in its application among members of the class to which it pertains. These requirements vary across different scientific fields of knowledge, but in general, scientific theories are expected to be functional and simple be used to effectively address the given class of phenomena. Scientific theories are constructed from elementary theorems that consist in empirical data about observable phenomena.

scientists, unify and simplify phenomena, suggest new relations, predict future occurrences, help in producing more refined theories, and increase the extent and accuracy of data and knowledge, among others. In view of the usefulness of theory in research, many scholars begin examining the problems of their study by first stating the theoretical frameworks within which they do so. In this case, they reveal to their readers the contextual framework within which they examine their problems. In other words, researchers who present a theoretical overview of their studies help their readers see, from the outset, the general shape of the terrain they would be exploring. More importantly, they give readers a clue as to how to understand their conclusions, and *why* and *how* they arrived at those conclusions, based on the paths they trod. These important considerations have made the formulation and use of theories a common practice in most fields of study, particularly in the natural sciences, including physics, biology, medicine, mathematics and statistics, and in some social sciences, such as sociology, economics, demography, political science, etc. In history, however, there is a lack of agreement regarding the formulation and application of theories in the reconstruction of the past. Thus, whereas some historians accept and employ theoretical concepts in their studies, others reject and avoid them altogether in their works. Interestingly, both camps have raised strong arguments in support of their positions. To able to draw a good conclusion, as to whether generalisations should or should not be applied in historical studies, requires a good understanding of the views of the two camps. However, this understanding could only be achieved through a thorough appraisal of the arguments of the factions. This study, therefore, examines some of the important arguments the two schools of thought have advanced in support of their positions, after which it draws a tangible conclusion based on the researcher's own point of view on the application of conceptual frameworks in historical reconstruction.

The 'Pro-Theorists' and the 'Anti-Theorists' Distinguished

There are prominent historians and other scholars, such as Friedrich Meinecke, Herder, Macaulay, Leopold von Ranke and R.G. Collingwood, who generally discourage the formulation of theoretical frameworks[1] based on facts about the past. They do so on the premise that the tools of the historical scientist are not suited to dealing with problems that concern the formulation of theories, and that historical reality may prove to be too complex to be adequately explained or described by even a sophisticated theory. Many such historians are very skeptical of theories of history derived from an alleged pattern of the past. They are particularly reluctant to base predictions about the future on such theories because theories that are formulated to account for events that occurred in the past can never be placed upon as secure a foundation as can theories in the natural sciences, which are subject to direct observations or controlled experiments.

These scholars are of the view that the special quality of history does not consist in the statement of general laws or principles, neither does the meaning of history lie hidden in some universal structure. Ranke who, together with his contemporaries and successors of the Prussian Historical School, made a signal advance in the scientific approach to history, was of the view that history cannot be cast into a rational system. He believed that it is impossible to force the wealth of historical life into the poverty of rational concepts, to subsume it under abstractions (cited in Meyerhoff, 1959: 11). The prime element of history, the anti-theorists point out, consists in the infinite variety of particular historical forms immersed in the passage of time or in the multiplicity of individual manifestations at different ages and in different cultures and civilisations. Put in another way, history concerns itself with events whose chief characteristic is their uniqueness, their unrepeatability, and since it does not appear possible for unique events to be the stuff of pattern, it is the character, the origins and implications of the individual event to which the historian addresses himself. They argue that the historian's main and characteristic task, therefore, is not to classify events, or to explain or describe them in terms of general laws, but only to explain or describe the special individual nature of each event. They insist that the historian's approach to, for example, the Biafran Civil War in Nigeria (1965–1970) or the January 13, 1972 coup d'état in Ghana is not to identify what they have in common with other civil wars or coups d'état respectively in Africa or elsewhere, but rather to show how they differ. They have, thus, confined themselves to the modest role of narration and interpretation of facts about the human past, leaving the investigation and formulation of generalisations to other social and physical scientists.

On the other hand, there are other scholars who have maintained that theories are important elements in every research work, irrespective of the field in which they are carried out. John H. Kautsky (1966: 8) has advanced that

> Those who identify the accumulation of data with science mistake an important part for the whole of the scientific process. Data alone cannot even tell us which data are important or in what relation they stand. Hence they tell neither how to arrange the

[1] In this study, the terms *theory or theories*, *theoretical framework(s)*, *theoretical formulation(s)*, *theoretical concept(s)*, *conceptual framework(s)*, *general law(s)* and *generalisations(s)* are used interchangeably to refer to the same concept.

> data in some meaningful order, so as to make a phenomenon understandable, nor even what further ones we should look for. To lead to at least tentative explanations as well as further research, the gathering of data must be followed by attempts to generalize about them and to sort out regularities of behavior. Only then can we account for the known data ….

In addition, following Thomas Kuhn, qualitative researchers have generally accepted the view that all observation is theory-laden, that our understanding of the world is inherently shaped by our prior ideas and assumptions about the world and that there is no possibility of purely objective or theory-neutral description independent of some particular perspective (Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2008: 876). Thus, theory is an inescapable component of all research, whether or not it is explicitly acknowledged. Historical research is universally acknowledged to be a purely qualitative study. Consequently, some historians, philosophers, and other scholars at different places and times have argued that though events do not repeat themselves in exactly the same manner, there are basic relationships inherent in sets of events or patterns in historical phenomena which permit the construction of theories or make it flexible to formulate and apply them. They have advanced that both the "macroscopic" or "group" historical phenomena, like the rise and fall of cultures and civilisations, revolutions, wars, coups d'état, social classes, etc., and the "microscopic" actions of individual human beings may possibly exhibit principles of regularity and uniformity similar to those which Galileo, Bacon, Newton, Einstein and others have shown to pertain among events in physical nature (Dray, 1967: 520).

With this notion, some historians have employed theories in their studies. It is interesting to note that Thucydides has been described as the first scholar to theorise about international relations in his *The Peloponnesian War* (Duncan, Jancar-Webster and Switky, 2004: 47). This is one of the reasons why he has been described as "the first scientific historian" and "the founder of scientific history" (Caldwell, 1965: 252–253). In his study, *The Decline of the West*, *1918-1922*, Oswald Spengler, also theorises about the past by describing civilisations as living organisms, each of which passes through identical stages at fixed periods. In his *A Study of History, 1934-1961*, the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee also discerned a uniform pattern in the histories of civilisations, although he was not so rigid a determinist as Spengler was. This class of historians generally content that the description and explanation of historical events are covered by general laws because they are similar to scientific descriptions and explanations. In other words, historical phenomena are described and explained in terms of general laws. This idea was advocated by Carl Hempel, a professor of philosophy, in an article entitled "The Functions of General Laws in History", published in 1942. This argument, particularly of historical explanation, has generally been referred to as the *Covering Law Model of Historical Explanation*. In this study, Hempel put forward the view that an event is explained when it is brought under a general law or a generalisation which does not admit any exceptions. Historical interpretations, therefore, are influenced by theories, inasmuch as these interpretations often establish conditions from which consequences derive.

Like Carl Hempel, some historians even state categorically that without a theoretical framework, history cannot be fully understood. Bauer, for example, has advanced that

> History cannot carry out its task without some conception of regularity, however restricted, and however empirically constructed. This enables the historian to build historical types and to see correlations on a large scale. It fills the gaps and makes it possible to make proper use of the testimony of the past (cited in Renier, 1950: 263).

In arguing that "There is no narration without interpretation; and there is no interpretation without a theory", Meyerhoff (1959: 20) is stressing that the story to be related must be interpreted within a conceptual framework. Morris R. Cohen and Ernest Nagel (1936: 340–341) have also argued that "The propositions dealing with the past must be so connected that they form a coherent whole. Systematic theories in terms of which the past is "explained," or made intelligible, are essential". Again, Jurgen Herbst (1962: 148) maintains that every historical narrative or analysis is a synthesis of data and interpretative framework because the historian, as author, interprets his data within a conceptual framework which he has devised. J.C. Aggarwal (2004: 4) is also of the same view. He posits that in the reconstruction of the past, mere narration should give way to the establishment of relationships between the selected happenings, and these relationships should lead to the development of general laws which should be able to reveal the real nature of the happenings. "In trying to develop such general laws", he continues, "comparison and contrast with the causal relationships existing among similar happenings in other social groups may also be made. This should improve the reliability and validity of these laws" (p. 4).

Scholars who believe theories are applicable in historical reconstruction stress that in the universe of events and processes, there exist certain regularities, certain patterns, generated by the causal linkages which bind the system together. Therefore, while it is one of the responsibilities of the historian to describe this

universe of events and processes, his more essential, and more difficult, task is to identify these regularities and explain them in terms of a consistent and mutually-supportive hierarchy of causal 'laws' which, once discovered, serve as a basis for explaining and describing past events and predicting the future.

It has been advanced further that if the historian gives his explanation of events in terms of *why* they occurred, they could theoretically be in terms of general laws; however, inasmuch as historians are more concerned with establishing *how* a particular event happened than *why*, the historian has to concentrate on the uniqueness of the occurrence he studies. This view is partly correct because some theories explain *why* events occur. It must be noted, however, that the assertion is partly misleading because historians not only offer descriptions of *how* events happened in the past, but they also give explanations for *why* those events occurred. In his *Africa in Modern History: The Search for a New Society* (1978), for example, Basil Davidson indicates at the outset that the central aim of the study "is to explain as well as to describe" (p. 16). In furtherance, it is wrong to assume that theories cannot help establish *how* events occur. There are theories that describe *how* a set of factors relate with others and combine to bring about the occurrence of certain events, as we have already pointed out. John Beattie (1977: 41) maintains that "… even the most common-sense descriptions are shot through with abstractions .... for a description of anything must be in general terms, and general terms are the names of classes, that is of abstraction …". S.F. Nadel (cited in Beattie, 1977: 79) also has pointed out that "… every way in which facts are grouped in description involves theories, implicit or explicit, about the connections between things that are significant …". Moreover, it is wrong to assume that descriptions merely describe; to some degree, at least, description also explains. Whether description always does more than merely describing or not, it is a fact that theories are involved in even the simplest descriptions (Beattie, 1977: 41). Following this view, Gilbert Ryle (1962: 289) has asserted that a historian's account, or description, of the course of a battle is his theory of that particular conflict.

These opposing views perilously place some category of historians at the point at which the two camps confront each other, which, in a way, may influence their works to reflect some of the qualities of each. Experts like economic historians, historians of migration and demography, historians of politics, etc. who, due to their areas of emphasis, examine issues related to social science disciplines like economics, sociology, anthropology, demography, political science, etc. and for that matter more often take a social scientist view of their profession are really put in a fix. Whenever, for example, economic historians consider themselves as economists, they may be tempted to employ theoretical considerations in their studies, but when they conceive of their activities as more akin to those of pure historians, they may be askance towards theoretical issues. Now, the question that needs an immediate answer is what should the historian do? Should he employ theoretical formulations in his study and reconstruction of the past or avoid them altogether?

Examination of the Arguments[1]

Whatever the case may be, we can neither go to the support of those in favour of the application of theories or conceptual frameworks in historical reconstruction nor to those against it without any scientific justification of our stance. Indeed, when a critical examination is made of the concerns of both schools, one realises that there are important elements of truth in both opposite directions. We can, therefore, take a stance only after we have examined the major or important arguments advanced by both sides of the debate in support of their positions. In the following paragraphs, an attempt has been made to explore and examine the arguments emanating from the two debating camps in order to be able to draw a convincing conclusion from the facts available.

[1] This study does not claim to examine all the important arguments advanced by both schools of thought. In fact, it is not possible to know all the bases of their arguments. Moreover, space constraints would not permit us to discuss all the reasons for which the two schools have never been able to come to an agreement. In view of all this, this study limits its examination to only two important issues, namely the impact of time and space on historical events and the issue of presentism. This selection has been made with the view to giving the two issues considerable attention and examining them in detail. Meanwhile, other equally important points on which the two schools of thought disagree are the issues of selection and the adequacy of theory in accounting for historical phenomena and testing theories about historical phenomena. On the first issues, whereas the anti-theorists argue that the problem of selection of facts for the reconstruction of the past renders theories inadequate in accounting for past events, the pro-theorists are of the view that selection of adequate historical evidence would help give a fair understanding of historical phenomena (see Dray, 1967: 522 and Lewis, 1965: 16). On the second, the anti-theorists put advance that theories about historical events cannot be experimented under controlled situations, while the pro-theorists come in with the counter that theories about the past are tested through observation, interpretation and comparison (see Herbst, 1962: 148 and Beattie, 1977: 78).

A. The Impact of Time and Space on Historical Phenomena

Anti-theorists: Changes the variables and conditions of historical events

One important argument originating from this camp is in connection with the relative complexity of social phenomena with regard to time and space. It is acknowledged that historical studies usually span relatively longer periods of time, which normally permit changes in variables consequent on the simultaneous changes in conditions and vice versa. Conditions sometimes determine the kind of events that take place, or should occur, at the moment; at other times, developments determine the conditions that prevail, or should obtain, at a particular time. There is, thus, an inseparable, or a cyclical, relationship between the conditions pertaining to a particular period of time and their corresponding developments, due to the exclusive nature of the working variables and their times. As a result, a relatively longer period would allow conditions producing changes in the character of their variables so that by the time the event ends its course, there might have been observed changes or variations in the variables and principles with which the event begun. The nature and character of the variables would, at least, not be in the same manner as they were at the starting point of the development under consideration.

For example, every culture that we know of, past or present, has included the universal institution of the family, which has been a necessity for survival and a common denominator of society. Though universal, the family has not been a static or stable institution. Today, the family is the product of human history, its evolutions and revolutions. Several events have made their mark on the family, as a result of the long historical journey it has travelled. A general approach to the subject of the family in any period, therefore, poses some fundamental questions, such as the concept or the contemporary perception of the family; the functions; the kind of kinship or inheritance system; the size and structure; the economic basis of the family; marriage and its processes; relationships within the family; control of family size; attitudes towards aging and death; and the physical environment (Gies and Gies, 1987: 6–15). A historical approach towards a study of the family would reveal that even within a single society these variables would assume different forms and significance at different times, depending on the changing conditions of the historical process. The family, as a concept, may be understood or defined contextually, and the functions may also vary from one period to another. The major functions of the modern family, according to sociologists, are the socialisation of the child, and the channelling of the adult's sexual and emotional needs. In the past, however, the family had other very important responsibilities: it functioned as a defence organisation, a political unit, a school, a judicial system, a church and a factory. Over the centuries, these functions have been surrendered one by one to the external institutions of modern society: the State, the Church, and industry, coupled with other social groups in contemporary societies.

With the kind of kinship, it is observed that larger groups, such as the ancestral lineage, that is, the clan, and the network of living relatives, that is, the extended family, were very important in most societies in the past. These two groups played important, often determinative roles in the transmission of property, the choice of marriage partners, the protection of the individual and the family, legal disputes, and many other aspects of daily life. In many modern societies, however, these kinship entities are of limited importance due to factors including migration and urbanisation, the capitalist system and its emphasis on the individual and his freedom, the Western-type education, etc. In the same way, one is likely to observe differences between societies in the present, the recent past, and the remote past with regard to almost all other aspects of the family.

Also in economic history, where one might consider it relatively less difficult to employ economic theories and models in examining the economy of past societies, chronology plays a pivotal role in bringing about dissimilarities in different economies. When, for example, we consider two economies, both developing but at different stages of development, the chronological difference between them would obviously ensure that their development could not follow precisely similar paths (Gould, 1972: 380). If, say, The Gambia did not reach until 1960 the equivalent point on its development path to that which Ghana had already attained in 1900, the implication would clearly be that the world environment which would face The Gambia in 1960 would substantially be different from that which confronted Ghana in 1900. By 1960, new materials, new modes of transport, etc. would have been pioneered and would be in the process of replacing those which were there in 1900. There would also be changes in the institutional environment: while one would be a world of free trade, the other would probably be that of protectionism. Moreover, The Gambia would confront a world in which Ghana would be sixty years more advanced than it had been in the environment that it faced in 1900. This fact would change the trade possibilities that would face The Gambia, making it practically burdensome to generalise about the two economies.

When reconstructing a historical event, generalisations can be made, using the deductive method, during some short period of time, within which the significant variables can be assumed to change very little, but when dealing with relatively long periods of time, caution must be taken. Even within these relatively short periods, there is danger in theorising about historical events. This is chiefly because the conditions and problems of various phenomena, including world politics, economic activities, social developments, etc., seem swiftly to

change their essential nature or relative importance even as we look at them in the present as contemporaries (Seabury, 1963: vii). Take, for example, the years 1953, when John Gunther published his book, *Inside Africa*, and 1983, when David Lamb published the first edition of his work, *The Africans: Encounters from the Sudan to the Cape*. The two works are separated by a period of thirty years, which, in the context of history, may be regarded as a relatively short period of time. Yet events described in the two studies are different because different conditions pertained at the different periods of data gathering and writing. In 1953, when Gunther published his study, not a single black African nation had regained its independence and sovereignty from the European imperialist powers. The Africa that Gunther wrote about was the last frontier of white colonialism, an orderly, uneventful place where the pulse of nationalism beat only faintly (Lamb, 1986: xiii). Due to the time frame and its conditions, Gunther's perspective was fashioned largely through interviews with white administrators and a handful of reportedly conservative Africans. At the time Lamb was writing, the Africa of Gunther's time no longer existed. By then, there were fifty-one countries in Africa, and each nation, except South Africa, was ruled by the majority. Lamb (1986: xiii) shows that the Africa that he "… encountered two decades later was the first outpost of black nationhood, volatile, unpredictable, [and] truculent". Due to the changing circumstances, Lamb even believed that "Events, no doubt, will overtake some sections of this book. Presidents I have interviewed and written about will be killed, imprisoned or exiled, political allegiances will waver, countries may even change their names" (p. xv). By implication, Lamb was certain that by the time he would finish writing his book, some of the events described or accounted for in the study would have changed. The historical actors and the conditions and variables of the events he was writing about would, therefore, never be the same as they were at the time he started the study. If this is the case with even a relatively short period, then what would it be with a comparatively long period of time? This problem, to a certain degree, does not allow the historian to get a good image and understanding of the exact characteristics of the variables and conditions of the events involved in his study.

Time aside, geography or space also has been used as a basis for rejecting theorising about social or historical phenomena. Here, the rationale is to guard against over-generalisation. When we look for patterns among the phenomena we observe, we often assume that a few similar events are evidence of a general pattern. That is, we tend to over-generalise on the basis of limited observations. This tendency may misdirect, or even impede inquiry because we know very well that different conditions pertain to different locations, and as social phenomena react differently to different social, cultural, psychological and physical conditions, it is true that the same social or historical phenomenon may be found in many different forms at different places (Kumekpor, 1999: 16). It is equally true that different historical events have different causal factors, which are sometimes influenced largely by the environment where the events take place.

Consider, for example, the conception of religion in all the cultures around the world throughout the ages. In a general sense, we may say that religion is a sacred engagement with that which is believed to be a spiritual reality. It is a worldwide phenomenon that has played a part in all human cultures and so is a much broader, more complex category than the set of beliefs or practices found in any single religious tradition. In all cultures, human beings make a practice of interacting with forces or powers that are taken to be spiritual. These may be in the form of gods, spirits, ancestors, the Supreme God, or any kind of sacred reality with which humans believe themselves to be connected. Sometimes a spiritual power is understood broadly as an all-embracing reality, and sometimes it is approached through its manifestation in special symbols. It may be regarded as external to the self, internal, or both. People interact with such a presence in a sacred manner, that is, with reverence and care.

It is agreed that *religion* is the term most commonly used to designate this complex and diverse realm of human experience. Can we say, however, that the development of religious ideas within cultures and civilisations, the nature or character of these religions, their dictates, their acceptance by some people and the repugnance they suffer from others, and their influence, follow the same course, or even pursue the same cause? Here, the anti-theorists issue a caution. There is the natural tendency to assume that the variables which worked to produce the events in the society with which we are familiar must necessarily be the same variables which operated to produce similar developments in all other societies: contriving to see the unfamiliar in the familiar. This assumption may be false, because no two cultural events can share exactly the same characteristics, let alone three or more. Since historical events are not natural developments, such as rainfall, sunshine, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, droughts and famines, birth and death, etc., we can never argue, for example, that all religions developed on the basis of certain universally acclaimed variables. Indeed, the phenomenon of religion has expressed itself variously in various cultures. Even within the same religious faith, there are variations in expression as the religion moves from one culture to another. For example, the expression of the Christian faith in Europe among indigenous Europeans is different from its expression among African in Europe and Africans on the African continent. Islam is also given African character in Africa that makes it vary from the land of its birth, Saudi Arabia. The same can be said of African Traditional Religion, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and, of

course, of any other faith. In essence, what religious experience means to the Christian is different from what it means to the African Traditional Religionist, the Hindu, the Buddhist, etc.

Again, the pro-theorists may argue, and it is true, that all past societies devised social, political and economic institutions, as well as agricultural techniques for the protection of their citizens, the smooth administration of their states and the general survival of their polities. For instance, since authority has always been necessary, there has always been some form of government in every society, irrespective of the size of the polity. They shared some commonalities, but because they evolved in different geographical areas, by people of different cultural systems and at different periods in history, they also differed in political structure and cultural styles. For example, common to all forms of government are, though of varying degrees, the systems of law and state officials who formulate and carry out the policies of the government under delegated authority. It is, however, very difficult, if not wholly impossible, to do an accurate comparison and contrasting of these elements of past civilisations in order to evaluate the levels of the historical 'intersections' or parallels and the divergences.

Further, the view that the economic historian, for example, would find himself in a quagmire if he does not exercise caution and decides straightaway to employ theoretical frameworks in his studies is not the result of mere bigotry but a really strong force to be taken into consideration. The scientist who is concerned with economic growth in history will, no doubt, observe some substantial dissimilarities in respect of structural changes. There have been obvious differences of economic structure from one country to another both in the past and in the present. In fact, most tests have shown that there is virtually no correlation between either area or population and income per head (Gould, 1972: 383). The wealthy countries of today vary greatly, for example, in both size and population, as do the poor countries of today. Wealthy countries may be large and populous like the U.S.A., large and fairly lightly populated like Canada, small and densely populated like the Netherlands, or fairly small and lightly populated like New Zealand. Among poor countries, India, Brazil, Ceylon and Paraguay fall in the same four categories respectively.

Economic historians even show that there are extremely large differences in trade/income ratios within both rich and poor countries, and also in the sectoral origins of national product, though within a narrow range. For example, whereas many backward parts of the world had very little foreign trade until the late nineteenth century, Jamaica, also a poor country, had an export/income ratio as high as forty-four per cent (44%) in 1832 (Eisner, 1961: 25). Also in the past, the majority of poor countries were dominated by agriculture, but there were still big variations in the structure of landholding and, as a sequel, in the distribution of income. The big seigniorial estates of Eastern Europe, cultivated by serf labour, yielded a very uneven income distribution, whereas the peasant proprietorship of parts of Western Europe and of South Asia led to a more egalitarian though still poor society, as did the dominantly hunting economy of the pre-European Maori or as still does the nomadic pastoralism of the East African Masai (Gould, 1972: 384). In view of these dissimilarities, it does not appear easy to conceive of growth as involving, in any vigorous way, either convergence toward a similar structure, although much has been made in recent years of the possibility that the economies of the U.S.A. and Russia may be converging, or diverging from a common base.

To advance that patterns run through similar historical phenomena irrespective of time and place is to say that we can also examine, for example, European colonisation of Africa in an appropriate contextual framework. If we consider the problems of time and geography together, however, the anti-theorists can make a good point out of European colonisation of Africa regarding variations in historical events. It would be very difficult to design a framework that is adequate enough to offer a full description or explanation and understanding of colonialism in all colonial territories in Africa. The reason is that colonialism started at different periods in the different territories. In Ghana, for example, whereas the Southern states came under European colonial rule as from 1874, or even earlier, Asante and the Northern Territories did not come under European subjugation until after the Yaa Asantewaa War of 1900–1901. Colonial territories were also acquired by different methods. Some, such as Asante, were acquired through conquest, whilst others, like Southern Ghana and the Northern Territories, were won by the signing of treaties. The environment the Europeans met at the different places and times and the conditions of the colonising countries and their respective colonial philosophies also influenced colonial policy and the developments that occurred in the course of European colonisation there. The British adopted the policy of Indirect Rule, using the local rulers as agents of local administration. In other words, the British system of administration was highly decentralised. On the other hand, the French preferred the policy of Direct Rule, even though they used the indigenous authorities to do the dirty work for them. The French system of administration was, thus, highly centralised. The British administered their territories separately, but the French chose to federate theirs.

All these arguments highlight the fact that comparison, as an essential element of analysis in historical studies, poses a major problem in situations where the historian is concerned with events which occurred at different times and places. Thus, in cases where the historical scientist is concerned with studies that cover

relatively long periods, or with developments in many societies, that is, dealing with events through time and space, applying theories may at first sight appear a difficult task, or even a burden, for the historian. He would have to look beyond the boundaries of the theories that are applicable in the events he is familiar with. He would have to decide, from the studies made by other historians, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, etc. what is universal, in the sense of what is common to human behaviour in different social circumstances, and be able to arrive at basic generalisations which stand up to comparison between societies. As a result of the element of change in history, which is introduced by time and space, the historian is not in the same position as a natural scientist conducting experiments to determine the effects of temperature changes on the conductivity of a particular metal, where observations could be repeated severally and the influence of all factors save the one under scrutiny held constant. He is not even in a position comparable to that of an economist attempting to explain the price of a commodity who is likely to find the same restricted range of variables at work in different markets at different places, or who can usually assume them to interact in much the same way on a particular day in a particular week as they did on the same day in a previous week.

Pro-theorists: Reveals the 'unity in diversity' in historical events

With these anti-theorists' arguments, we need to appreciate in the first place that it is not everything about the past or all aspects of historical events that historians study. Selection is an important element in historical reconstruction. The historian has to choose certain aspects of anything he wishes to study because we cannot understand all its aspects at once. What historians do is to abstract from the social behaviour which they observe relatively enduring and institutionalised aspects which seem to hang together and make sense, in reference to some particular interest or question which, consciously or unconsciously, they have in mind. In addition, a theory is not obliged to be applicable to all processes, or facts or events in the case of history. Bertrand Russell (1948: 424) has shown that "… every empirical concept is certainly applicable to some objects, and certainly inapplicable to others". Each process has its own unique history, people, places, and events that are cast, stage, and play in the real-life drama. However, a set of basic relationships lie beneath these unique and fascinating specifics. Continuity and unity, indeed, exist in the succession of generations, and these enduring patterns and relationships are revealed as historians and other scholars study a setting across the generations. G.J. Renier (1950: 264) advances that "It is possible to get in contact with historical data only upon the assumption that events in human consciousness take place in identical or similar internal and external circumstances".

Considering these arguments, the pro-theory school of thought would react to the anti-theorists' stance on changes from one generation to another by advancing the convincing fact that whilst many material objects have changed, and human beings have also been continuously evolving, certain universal patterns and human characteristics have hardly undergone changes that are sharp enough to obscure their relative stability in the course of the universal motion. It is a fact that one cannot study history without observing and studying changes. Historians analyse major changes in the human experience over time. They explain why change occurs and what impact it has. They, however, do not end there; they also examine the ways in which those changes link the past to the present. Ernst Breisach (1994:3) has advanced forcefully that

> History cannot for long remain the record of changes alone because that would deny the true nature of human life in which the experience of change is counterbalanced by that of continuity. Individuals and groups have long since discovered that even in the aftermath of the most radical revolutions the "new age" still carries many marks of the past.

In a process of change, of course, we may detect continuity and persistence, and as things change, stasis, that which remains unchanged, becomes more evident (Kottak, 1999: 235). As a result, since history is a study of human society in motion, historians pinpoint continuities from the past along with innovations (Stearns, et al., 2004: xxv). Let us not forget that there were a vast number of formal norms in past societies which created a considerable degree of regularity. Where monarchism or chieftaincy was practised as a political system, for example, only members from the royal family were eligible for selection and inheritance. Where the matrilineal system of inheritance was practised, as in ancient Ghana and Mali and among the Akan of modern Ghana, succession to property and office was through the female line, and where the patrilineal system of inheritance was practised, as in Songhai, Kanem-Bornu, the Hausa States and among the Ewe, Ga-Adangbe and Mole-Dagbani of modern Ghana, succession to either was, and is, through the male line. Such formal prescriptions, then, regulated, or regularised, social behaviour.

Formal prescriptions apart, we could observe other social norms that created more regularities. Almost all past civilisations had, as their features, political, economic, and social institutions and were organised along these lines. In examining them, therefore, historians classify them into political organisation; social organisation;

economic development; arts, crafts, and architecture; science and technological development; internal and external trade; military organisation; religious development; etc. Social regularities or commonalities are observed even in historical literature that cut across different historical periods. In a rigorous inquiry into American populism, Richard Hofstadter (1955: 72, footnote 2), for example, has been impressed by certain similarities in the style of thought displayed by their authors. He has found in the literature

> … certain persistent themes in popular agitation … that transcend particular historical eras. Among the themes … that one finds in Populist literature as well as among their agitators are the following: the conception of history as conspiracy; an obsessive concern with the fabulous enjoyments deemed to be the lot of the plutocrats; cynicism about the two-party system; the notion that the world is moving toward an immense apocalypse; the exclusive attention to the greed and other personal vices of bankers and other selected plutocrats, as opposed to a structural analysis of the social system; anti-Semitism and xenophobia; the appeal to the native simplicity and virtue of the folk (p. 72–73, footnote 2).

With regard to colonialism also, certain similarities have been observed. These common features can be abstracted and analysed as a uniform phenomenon. In the first place, we can generally define colonisation or colonialism as the direct imperial domination of a relatively stronger country over the peoples and lands of relatively weaker nations, usually achieved through aggressive, often military, action for political, economic and strategic purposes (Lee, 1994: 160; Smith and Zurcher, 1955: 74; and Rodney, 2009: 164–165). If we can give a uniform explanation to colonisation, then we have to understand first that it must have exhibited some general features wherever it occurred. If this is true, then we can argue further that there was a certain pattern to the ways in which colonies developed and the nature of socio-economic policies and political administrations the European imperialists established (Thompson, 1968: 203).

Of course, when we survey the colonial field, we observe that at the initial stages of colonial enterprise, European traders and missionaries arrived and built small outposts. Troops were then stationed to protect the outposts. Outlying tribes and traders, objecting to the European presence, raided their caravans and trading stations. European troops then pushed inland to punish the tribes and keep order. Roads and railways had to be built for the dual purpose of enabling troop movements and to expand trade. Labourers were needed to build road and to erect buildings or to assist the European war effort, and so local people were required to help. This help could be in the form of forced labour, which took labourers from their homes without pay and left them bitter towards the European administrators. Where climatic conditions favoured European settlements, such as in South Africa, Algeria and Kenya, European governments sometimes encouraged settlers to come from Europe in order to populate the territories and grow profitable crops on a large scale. This meant that the colonials were in most cases left without land on which to hunt, farm, or feed their animals. Where minerals were discovered beneath the soil, the indigenous people were forced to move in order to clear the land for mining.

In terms of colonial administrative purposes, the Portuguese and the Belgians talked of the policy of *Assimilado* or *Civilizado*, the Germans and the French of *Direct Rule*, and the British of *Indirect Rule*. These policies, however, differed only in name and implementation. The rationale behind them all was the same: the maximum exploitation of the human and natural resources of the colonial peoples for the benefit of the colonising countries. In all colonial territories, the health of the economy was measured not by how much the colonial peoples benefitted from the colonial economy, but by how much the colonising countries gained from the colonial economy. The colonial economy was tightly regulated. To fully realise their programmes of exploitation, all colonial administration were known to have exhibited features of a police state. This reflected in the arbitrary and repressive exercise of power. Forced labour, brutal land excision, torture and taxation were universal traits of colonialism. It was through this brutality that many Africans in colonial territories lost their lives in colonial mines, roads, railways and plantations.[1]

On the issue of religion also, the pro-theorists may argue that in spite of the variations in religious faiths, religious experience is a universal phenomenon. In all religions, there are some things any critical observer will appreciate as common among them and that qualify to call them as belonging to the Traditional Religion of Africans or Christianity or Judaism or Hinduism or Buddhism, etc. Again, it is important to note that no matter the differences among religions, they all serve a common goal: they provide meaning to the various riddles of human life to the believers. Finally, it is the same Ultimate Reality that reveals itself in all religious experience. It is based on these common features that religion has been described as a moving stream which has

[1] These elements also applied in the case of Asian and Latin American colonial territories.

no colour of its own but takes on the colour of the soil that it moves through but still maintaining its nature of being a river.

If historical events share common identical internal and external circumstances, as Renier advances, then it follows that these events can be classified and examined theoretically on the basis of their common features and differences. Here, whereas the anti-theorists would classify, for example, internal migration, international migration, immigration, emigration, voluntary migration, involuntary (or forced) migration, cyclic migration, periodic migration, temporary migration, permanent migration, seasonal migration, labour migration, illegal migration, nomad migration, mass migration, chain migration, free migration, rural-urban migration, urban-rural migration, political migration, etc. as species, the pro-theorists would rather consider them as varieties.[1] Thus, though historians are more concerned with the collection and establishment of facts and less with theoretical formulations based on these facts, they, as scientists, also show, where necessary, how events at different times and different places resemble each other; they abstract the common features of events; they analyse trends and developments taking place over relatively short and over very long periods of time. They make statements summing up the regularities which they have discovered; they discern order and pattern in the human past.

B. The Problem of Presentism

Anti-theorists: Present conditions may influence theorising about the past

Another important danger, for which the anti-theorists reject completely the use of theoretical formulations in historical reconstruction, is that in attempting to theorise about the past, there is the tendency to explain historical events in terms of the theories current at the time of writing. This is what is referred to as *presentism*. It is the habit of reading into the past our own modern ideas and intentions. In this process, the historian, or the scholar, plants his own values, or those which he thinks belong to his own time, in the minds of the people of the past, and approves of their achievements or judges their shortcomings according to these present-day standards.[2] A Marxist historian, for example, is likely to explain in the context of economic materialism peasant revolts that occurred many years before the invention of the Marxist conception of history. It should be noted, however, that the anti-theorists strongly condemn the distortions brought about by "present-mindedness". It is also important to note that Lawrence W. McBride, Frederick D. Drake and Marcel Lewinski (1996: 5) have suggested that even in the critical evaluation of evidence, some of the important elements to consider include avoiding present-mindedness. In science, and in history, the solutions to problems, past and present, are judged by criteria that are usually objective, universally accepted, and stable from one period to the next. Meanwhile, although there is, of course, continuity and unity in the historical pattern, variations, in terms of change and diversity, in culture and human behaviour across time and even in space are also observed. As a result, the easy supposition that phenomena of different periods that look similar are indeed identical, and particularly that past systems of thought are identical with those current at the present time, is bound to be misleading (Crombie, 1959: 2). This is not to deny that there is a relationship between the past and present, and that it is legitimate to attempt to establish a connection between the two. This, however, is not the same as attempting to understand the past and present in their respective contemporary setting.

Considering, for example, what we may call, for want of a better term, the *writing theory of history*, we may understand better the anti-theorists' position on the issue of presentism in theoretical formulations about the past. It is well-known that one of the fraudulent theories Europeans or colonial historians formulated about the African past was that Africa did not have a history. They viewed Africa as a historically backward continent, and this backwardness was sometimes explained in terms of decadent and barbaric customs, but most often in terms

[1] We are using the term *species* in a sense to represent separate historical events, designed by different peoples at different places and times, and, therefore, playing different roles in the economy of migration culture. The term *varieties*, on the other hand, is used in a sense to represent merely those members of a single species, that is, migration, who, because of such conditions as climate, geography, and historical actors and their motives, change their appearance in one way or the other. We may consider them as, and compare them with, biological organisms. According to *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Science and Technology*, *species* biologically refers to a group of individuals that (1) actually or potentially interbreed with each other but not with other such groups, and (2) shows continuous morphological variation within the group but which is distinct from other such groups. *Variety* refers to a category of individuals within a species which differ in constant transmissible characteristics from the type but which can be traced back to the type by a complete series of gradations; or to a geographical or biological race. See page 834 for species and 945–946 for variety.

[2] In 1912, Carl Becker defined "presentism" as "the imperative command that knowledge shall serve purpose and learning be applied to the solution of the problems of human life" (cited in Zinn, 1970: 17). In this study, we are not using the term in the sense as defined by Becker, but as we have defined it above.

of material culture.[1] The single most important variable that built this theory was *writing*. In fact, 'without writing and so without history' was the theme of colonial historiography (Wallerstein, 1961: 11). Certainly, there are no peoples without a sense of history. Human history, of course, began to be enacted with the appearance of the first humans on earth, and since Africa has been proven to be the origins of the human species, human history took its roots from Africa. It is, therefore, wholly wrong to argue that Africa had no history until her contact with the invaders of the continent. European or colonialist historiographers maintained that Africa had no history because until recently, history, in the Western tradition, was conceived as a body of knowledge based upon written evidence. This did not help reveal the true image of the African past.

This is one of the instances that help to clarify the position of the anti-theorists on the issue of presentism in generalisation in history. Here, Western scholars were using ideas and notions in their present culture to judge the African past. Since the variable, writing, of the theory conflicted with the facts of the phenomenon it attempted to explain, both in time and in space, the European *writing theory of history* could neither give a good account of African unhistoricity nor historicity. Instances of this nature have created the fear that theories may not be adequate to give a true meaning of historical events. Since most events, people and ideas of any age are fully understood only within the whole metaphysical and theological, scientific and technical, and socio-economic and political as well as intellectual contextual frame of which they formed part, it would be improper to examine past facts in the context of present events and ideas. If historical events are examined in their proper time contexts, they may even be revealing, because we are likely to prejudge them differently, than the assumptions we have all too easily formed about them.

In sum, it is essential to point out that, presentism certainly can lead to the most insidious form of the falsification of history, because it can lead the historian to overlook or minimise ideas engrossing and potent in the thought of earlier generations. It is directly in relation to this issue that Arthur O. Lovejoy (1959: 179) has argued that

> The more a historian has his eye on "the problems which history has generated in the present," or has his inquiry shaped by the *philosophic* conceptual material of the period in which he writes, the worse historian he is likely to be ….

The point is that no historian can assume that the major problems of the present were the same major problems of the past, or that the controlling categories and presuppositions of thinkers of all former ages were those commonly accepted in the present. In view of this, it would be foolish to extrapolate the findings of current studies back into the past and to assume that the same patterns must necessarily have prevailed then (Thernstrom, 1972: 125). It is, therefore, advisable for historians to test any hypothesis or propositions about the past, about a time when the event under review may have had a quite different social meaning for people at the time, against evidence drawn from the historical record.

Pro-theorists: Present perspectives can help in understanding the past better

In the natural sciences and the most social sciences, theories are premised on current evidence and findings. Since historical events are past developments, it is necessarily logical to study them in their respective time context in order to gain a proper understanding of them.[2] At the same time, it is acknowledged that the climate of opinion about phenomena changes in every generation, and as this happens, it becomes necessary to revise existing works in line with current ways and thinking. In other words, as culture changes, the conceptions that are dominant in a culture also change, and, as a result, new standpoints for viewing, appraising and ordering data arise (Dewey, 1959: 166). Succeeding generations attempt to correct preceding ones, challenge traditional interpretations and tackle old historical problems with new points of view. On the issue of presentism, therefore, the pro-theorists would point out strongly that there is really nothing wrong with seeing and understanding the past through the ideas and intentions of the present because in reality, the best historian is believed to be the one who examines and understands better life as it is lived *now*. Benedetto Croce (cited in Clark, 1967: xix), for example, has remarked that 'every true history is ideally 'contemporary', because if the historian, living as he must in the present, could not assimilate the past into his present, then he could not know it or write anything

[1] For a detailed analysis of this issue, see Adjei Adjepong, "The Image of Pre-Colonial Africa in European Circles", in Eric Sakyi Nketiah, ed., *Distance Forum*, Vol. I, (London: AuthorHouse, 2011), pp. 25–28.

[2] Some people consider the term 'modern history' as a contradiction. Their point is that history is the reverse of modern; what makes it history is that it is different from our knowledge of the present, so that, unless they start from the assumption that the past is finished and done with, historians cannot be historians at all. See George Clark, "General Introduction: History and the Modern Historian", in G.R. Potter, ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History: Volume I The Renaissance 1493–1520*, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1967), p. xix.

about it that was either true or intelligible to his contemporaries. This statement, either directly or indirectly implies that history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its predicaments. It is also important to note the definition which Raymond Aron (1959: 154) has formulated for history. In his view, "History is the reconstitution by and for those who are living of the life of those who are dead. It is born therefore of the present interest which thinking, feeling, acting men find in exploring the past". A civilisation in existence today, for example, only "… stands as a living civilization among those which are dead …" (Aron, 1959: 154). The knowledge of our current civilisations, therefore, will enable us to form a true picture of the majority of former civilisations. There should, thus, be a close relationship between history and current theories, deriving from current affairs, in the first place.

One may wonder the rationale behind, or the need for, such a strong amicability between the past and present, though the two are obviously different. Needless to show that current affairs are, in a simple sense, living history. Current affairs, or contemporary developments, provide the approach or means of breaking down or simplifying difficult topics in historical documents and also links the present to the past in order to give a clear understanding of the historical topics under review for students to adduce reasons to why certain events are happening in our contemporary world. For example, the ideologies of the New Patriotic Party, on the one hand, and the Convention People's Party and all other Nkrumahist political groups in Ghana at present can be linked to the ideological differences between Nkrumah and the founders of the United Gold Coast Convention, of which Nkrumah became the General Secretary, leading to Nkrumah's break away from the UGCC to found the CPP. A critical examination of the philosophies of these contemporary political parties would enable students of history to understand better the ideological stances of the UGCC and the CPP in the past. Again, the incorporation of current affairs into history helps in reducing the abstract nature of history and makes it easier to understand historical events. This is achieved when a relationship is established between past developments and contemporary history. This relationship, whilst helping to determine the historical origins or causes of current developments, on the one hand, gives more meaning to the past, on the other hand. In view of these facts, it seems to Grattan (1971: 357)

> … that men fully seized of the complexity of the experience of life as contemporaneously lived are the best historians, particularly if they are strongly empathetic of human situations not within their personal experience. For to write history well requires that one be strongly seized of the terms and conditions of life in the past – in time and space – able imaginatively to recover "what it was like" to live "way back when" and often "way off there" also; and those who are most acutely aware of how life is lived *now*, are most likely, given empathy, to capture and convey what the past was like. And since much of what concerns history is of the nature of public affairs in the present, … a keen interest in contemporary public affairs is an extremely useful accompaniment of, or preparation for, historical writing.

Let us consider also R.G. Collingwood's observation that "The object [of the historian's work] must be of such a kind that it can revive itself in the historian's mind; and the historian's mind must be such as to offer a home for that revival". Collingwood (1946: 247) shows in *The Idea of History* that historical thinking is an imaginative process by which one applies the present as evidence of one's past and often one assumes the context to be right. This implies that every contemporary reconstruction has a past of its own and, thus, any imaginative reconstruction of the past requires an understanding of the present, the present in which the act of imagination is still going on, as perceived here and now. To this, we add Edmund S. Morgan's (1976: ix) advice that "… because historical events fade with the passage of time, it often needs refreshing". All professional historians appreciate the values of these observations to historical practice. The reason why is, therefore, obvious, but the *how* aspect still remains to be answered. Can a historical event be revived or refreshed in purely its historical time frame? The event may, and should, remain intact, untampered with, but the environment in which the revival or refreshing is done can never be that period in which the event actually occurred. Often, historical reconstruction is done many years later after the events had taken place, and the contemporary period in which the reconstruction is done has its own features which impact on historical writing. Then already, historical events are influenced by the materials, methods and techniques of the contemporary period, or the present time, in which the reconstruction is done. John Dewey (cited in Lovejoy, 1959: 174) is, thus, not wrong in postulating that "The conceptual material employed in writing history is that of the period in which the history is written". Yet, no one questions this feature. In fact, if this element in historical writing were to be objected to, then historiography would suffer a great deal, as it allows historians to create new interpretations of the past; that is to say 'to put an old wine in a new skin.'

Again, Ernst Breisach (1994: 2) has observed that "every change in the conditions of the present and the expectations for the future revises our perception of the past". Also, according to NCERT (cited in Aggarwal, 2004: 2), "History is the scientific study of past happenings in all their aspects, in the life of a social group, in the light of present happenings". In fact, every study of the past must begin with the study of things existing contemporaneously with such a study. The study of the past, therefore, begins with the present, because "history … yields her secrets only to those who begin with the present" (Nisbet, 1966: 5). Further, Claude Lanzmann (cited in Runia, 2007: 314) has maintained that when one writes about the Holocaust, "the worst moral and aesthetic mistake you can make is to approach your subject as if it belongs to the past." In addition, Marc Bloch (cited in Aggarwal, 2004: 7) has pointed out that

> … a man may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present. For here, in the present, is immediately perceptible that vibrance of human life which only the great effort of the imagination can restore to the old texts. … In the last analysis, whether conscious or not, it is always by borrowing from our daily experiences and by shading them, where necessary, with new tints that we derive the elements which help us to restore the past. The very names we use to describe ancient ideas or vanished forms of social organisations would be quite meaningless if we had not known living men. The value of these merely instinctive impressions will be increased a hundredfold if they are replaced by ready and critical observation.

In a related development, Raymond Aron (1959: 156) has argued that "History is a dialogue between the past and present in which the present takes and keeps the initiative." To seal the argument, M.I. Finley (cited in Isichei, 1997: 25) is reported to have remarked that

> All interest in the past is a dialogue … The more precisely we listen, and the more we become aware of its pastness, even of its near-inaccessibility, the more meaningful the dialogue becomes. In the end, it can only be a dialogue in the present, about the present.

These arguments emphasise the view that historical writing must be done in a way that gives the events explained or described contemporary flavour. The point is that, to consider Finley's argument, 'a dialogue in the present', about a historical event, which is 'about the present' definitely requires present-mindedness, which is not a crime in historical practice. It is also a fact that just as it is expedient for the social scientist to gain an adequate understanding of the past of the society he examines today, so does the historian require a good comprehension of the present of the society whose past he attempts to reconstruct. In his "Introduction" to Allen M. Potter's *American Government and Politics*, K.C. Wheare (1955: 3) points out that any person who attempts to explain American government to British readers must himself know almost as much about British government as he does about American government, before he can convey adequately to his British readers the fact that Americans think very differently about these matters, and ask and receive very different things from their own political institutions.

In an analogous fashion, does it not follow that the historian who attempts to explain the past to the present must also first know as much about the present as he does about the past, in order to convey to the present the fact that the past differed from the present in some respects? Moreover, if there is any logic in the view that "The historian of science would lose immensely if he failed to make use of superior modern knowledge to evaluate the discoveries and theories of the past" (Crombie, 1959: 2), then the historian is not at fault to use present developments as a key to understanding the past. In fact, in many cases, it is difficult to avoid altogether influences of the present in certain studies, even where the writers make the attempt to eschew the anachronism of forcing present views on past events. This is usually so because historical investigations, as John Dewey (cited in Lovejoy, 1959: 175) shows, are controlled by the dominant problems and conceptions of the culture of the period in which they are written. Thus, in his *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, in which he reconstructs the history of the sixty-five year period from 1890 to 1955, Richard Hofstadter (1955: 3) states that the study was "… inspired not by a desire to retell the familiar story of the primary movements of reform in the United States since 1890, but by the need for a new analysis from the perspective of our own time." Essentially, Hofstadter reconstructed the 1890–1955 American history from the point of view of the present, that is, the time at which he wrote.

Clearly, systematic reconstruction of the past can hardly be completely free from present perspectives. If, indeed, the fact of selection is accepted to be primary and fundamental in historical studies, as it is in other

sciences, then we are committed to the conclusion that all history is necessarily written from the standpoint of the present (Dewey, 1959: 167–168). After all, historiography, though mainly concerned with past events, is itself a present event, and both the selections and interpretations of historical writing are determined by present causes and motives (Lovejoy, 1959: 174). Applying theories with contemporary flavour in historical reconstruction would, therefore, not be strange in scientific studies of the past, because contemporary issues can, certainly, be both a stimulus and a valuable guide to the scientific study of the past (Crombie, 1959: 4). Rather, the concern should regard caution: the historian must be careful in order not to adopt a framework or perspective that would end up misrepresenting the event, and, hence, leading to distortion and further ignorance.

Analysis and Conclusion

From the arguments outlined above, we observe that both opposing factions have strong points in support of their stances. The anti-theory arguments are so convincing that in some cases it is difficult, if not impossible, to turn them down. Clearly the use of theories in historical reconstruction, as in any other scientific activity, can be abused and misused like any other method. In particular, it is dangerously easy to fit facts to theory, instead of using them to test theory. It is, therefore, understandable that to give a full and clear image, explanation or description, of historical developments, it is advisable to consider them as unique individual events. However, it has been observed that although generalisations must always be regarded with suspicion, there is no way of finally avoiding them altogether, since, as David Knight (1992: xi) maintains, the sciences are not just collections of facts, but are ordered by theory. Again, it has been established in the scientific realm that formulating a theory to be tested is the first important step in conducting any research (Fields, Barber and Riggs, 1988: 17). Bryan Magee (1973: 26) emphasises that the growth of our knowledge proceeds from problems, and our attempts to solve these problems involve propounding theories which must go beyond our existing knowledge. Of course, scientific knowledge in any field of study advances only by seeking the general in the particular (Beattie, 1977: 46). History is a scientific discipline,[1] which conducts research aimed at solving historical problems in order to contribute to present knowledge. Moreover, if we accept that social scientists like political scientists, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, demographers, etc. do formulate theories for examining social phenomena, then we should be able to accept, at least to some degree, that the historian, who studies the past of the present, can apply theories in his reconstruction of the past. The point is that

> It cannot be true both that … [a social phenomenon] is orderly and lawlike when scrutinized by social scientists who live in it, but anarchistic when analysed by the historian of a later period. The nature and degree of determinateness of the relationships between the constituent 'events' of an historical period are objective facts, like the events themselves, and cannot be changed after the event, however much our subsequent interpretations of them may be selective, subjective, [and] 'culture-bound' (Gould, 1972; 379).

James B. Conant (1951: 58) is of the view that science may be considered as an attempt to lower the degree of empiricism or to extend the range of theory. He shows that virtually all significant works of scientists today come under the heading of attempts to reduce the degree of empiricism (p. 59), and it is only by the introduction of a theoretical element that the degree of empiricism can be reduced (p. 28). If we accept rightly that history is a science, which is true, then we must allow it to employ theoretical formulations, where available, necessary, and applicable, and in a cautious manner, in order to help make its systematic approach to its subject matter complete. We must equally not forget the fact that the historical scientist examines the activities and relations of people organised into social groups commonly called *societies*. The historian's duty is to find out how people organised into societies were related to one another in various institutionalised ways in the past so that we could understand their present forms and know their future course. Society, then, as a network of relationships, is simply the context in which the historian carries out his inquiries. If society presents itself as a

[1] In the past, many scholars argued in the disfavour of history as a science. At present, however, it may be considered wholly irrelevant to challenge the view that history is a science because numerous research works have helped solve this issue. Jurgen Herbst (1962: 149), for example, has stressed that both natural and social scientists carry out research with the view to discovering previously unknown facts and to express them clearly, logically and meaningfully. He maintains that in doing so, all scientists organise and interpret their data; and though they may differ from one another in the varying degrees of the emphasis they place on their discovery, explanation, and creative interpretation of data, they all found their scholarship on the perfected techniques of discovery and the rational character of their interpretations and conclusions (p. 150). Herbst states categorically that the historian is also a scientist because his methods of source criticism and documentation are scientific, his narrative corresponds to what he believes were historical facts, and his analysis is internally consistent and gives the reader the opportunity to check the conclusions against the known data and against the demands of logic (p. 150).

network of relations and serves as a context, it obviously implies that the historian examines his problem in a social framework. This, in itself, is an evidence of the possibility that the historian can apply theories in his research study.

This, probably, is the reason why it has been argued that "history is more accurately described as a branch of sociology, illustrating general laws governing the behaviour of society …" (Burston, 1962: 1–2). Viewed from this angle, history has been regarded as essentially a process of classifying events into groups and of explaining them in terms of sociological or universal laws governing the behaviour of a class of events. In fact, using the scientific method, some historians have gone to the extent of trying to discover and formulate the general laws that govern human conduct, assuming that as natural phenomena, human acts are influenced by natural laws (Hockett, 1961: 7). Auguste Comte, while rejecting the view that history, by itself, produces theories, has also acquiesced in the fact that "… history provides an agglomeration of particular observations that could provide data for generalisation and the testing of social theories" (Aiken, 1956: 122). If the historian can provide other scientists with data to design frameworks for their studies, why cannot the historian use the data himself in formulating theories in his own field of study? It would, indeed, be ironical, even embarrassing, and illogical for one to claim that the historian is not competent in doing, on his own and for himself, what he helps others to do.

These arguments directly substantiate John Dewey's (1959: 165) view that theories are as necessary to historical reconstruction as they are in inquiries in other sciences that lead to definite conclusions. In some cases, the practitioners may not be aware that in accounting for events of the past, their explanations follow certain patterns; but this does not mean that an inquiry into the study will never reveal a pattern inherent in the course the event took, which reflects in the approach adopted towards the examination of the phenomenon. It must be noted that ordinary practising historians follow patterns of their own creation or choice even when they account for *unique* events, whether wittingly or otherwise. The point is that their approaches dictate that the events or topics they examine could best, and should, thus, be known, understood, and explained or described in terms of their models. They may be wrong or imperfect, as Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide has been described (Giner, 1972: 31). They may be infused with prejudice; the researchers may be ignorant of some important facts whose contribution to a better understanding of the events described cannot be underestimated, or whose absence for examination and inclusion may detract so much from the adequacy of the theory. Such theories, however, still hold as theories. It is important to note that a theoretical framework does not necessarily have to be true to be useful, nor does the fact that the historian can dredge up a few random examples which appear to discredit necessarily destroy its validity (Barraclough, 1978: 287–288). Even when they are overturned by new facts, established on the basis of newly discovered evidence, they still remain theories. We should keep in mind the fact that in science, nothing is ever known; there is no absolute knowledge; there is always room for revision. Dewey (1959: 165–166) even criticises that

> The formation of historical judgments lags behind that of physical judgments not only because of greater complexity and scantiness of the data, but also because to a large extent historians have not developed the habit of stating to themselves and to the public the systematic conceptual structures which they employ in organizing their data to anything like the extent in which the physical inquirers expose their conceptual framework. Too often the conceptual framework is left as an implicit presupposition.

From Dewey's observations, the conclusions drawn by historians are sometimes challenged by others, not because they do not have sound foundations but because the theoretical frameworks that inform them are not stated for the guidance of readers. Most importantly, it has been pointed out that a field of knowledge can develop coherently only when an adequate conceptual framework is available (Storer, 1966: vii). In fact, theories, for the historian, may help indicate relationships and patterns which he can profitably employ in interpreting historical evidence. Elements and lines of investigation that would not occur to the empiricist relying on ordinary 'common sense' may often be suggested by the results of logical theorising (Barraclough, 1978: 287). It is a mistake to see and conceptualise the universe, human life, and natural as well as social events as fragmented, and organise them into individual compartments. The world we live in does not exist in isolation. There are many other elements that contribute to its existence, and between one thing and another, there is always a connection. Thus, if we continue to visualise the universe, human existence, and events in different compartments, we will never be able to adequately answer the historical questions that have challenged the human intellect for centuries. If it is accepted that the historian cannot fail to have theories in his investigations, then it is pointless debating the utilisation of theoretical concepts in historical reconstruction. The debate should

rather be concerned with the extent to which the historian's theory is sound, articulate, and properly geared to his cause.

It must be noted, however, that though history is a science, its tools are not as advanced and refined as those of the natural sciences. As a result, theories as comprehensive as those of the natural sciences, and those which could serve as the basis for predicting the development of social institutions may be achieved, if at all, with difficulty in human history. It has even been argued that no one can formulate an 'unchanging law of history' on the basis of our knowledge of the past (Vansina, 1973: 185) because, though history is subject to regularities that make it a serious scientific study, these regularities are sometimes upset by extraneous events (Carr, 1986: xxvi). Here, confrontation with factual situations may possibly bring to light flaws or ambiguities which may require the conceptual image to be remodeled or sometimes even discarded. In another sense, the subject matter of history is more complicated, that is, it involves more factors. Accordingly, theories in history cannot be designed as precisely as in the natural sciences. Theories of history cannot be explored very easily in a deductive approach, and, therefore, they are incapable of definite verification and falsification, as is done in the sciences of nature. Hence, the investigator may use general categories only as a heuristic help, to make it possible to understand the relation of things, but he must be ready at any time to correct his generalisations by means of his factual material or to give them up in favour of more plausible connection (Renier, 1950: 262). In the final analysis, we would wish to emphasise that there is nothing so useful to historical reconstruction and understanding as a good theory.

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