

## Essay 2

### **“A historian must combine the rigour of the scientist with the imagination of the artist.” To what extent, then, can the historian be confident about his or her conclusions?**

Writing history, argues Thurén, can be likened to building a house, with the facts resembling the building material. “One has to have good building material and construct the building so that it is strong. But what the house will look like in the end does not only depend on the material, but also on the architect / historian.”<sup>1</sup> This is, to my mind, a good analogy of the *view* that history, as the subject studied by a historian, is a combination of scientific and artistic – or, in the extension, objective and subjective – knowledge. Some aspects of the end result are always determined by the facts available. If there is only timber, it is bound to be a wooden house and if there is yellow paint, the house will be yellow. But, as we all know, no two architects would build identical houses of the same building material. And, while a serious historian cannot ignore his facts, he has to use his imagination to form a whole. Likewise, I will employ, when writing this essay, facts, examples and analogies as building material, and hope that I will manage to assemble it into a strong house.

First, I am going to lay the foundation and explain what I understand and define as the three types of knowledge this discussion is mainly concerning. On the one hand, there is knowledge resulting from the scientific method, which strives to be objective and replicable. This knowledge is exposed to high demands of rigour, since to be regarded as knowledge it needs to be acknowledged and accepted at least by a majority of the scientific society, and adequate proofs have to be presented; otherwise it would be just a theory among many. On the other hand, artistic knowledge does not strive for universality or replicability, since it is based on the individual’s experiences. Hence, it can be said to be a subjective or personal kind of knowledge. Finally, between these two poles there is historical knowledge, regarded as a combination of both the former. Like in the Natural Sciences, the historian gathers information, for instance documents and accounts, and with the same rigour scrutinises his procedure and criticises his sources. But history involves humans, and the information and facts of history can only with human imagination be interpreted and put into a context. While scientific and artistic knowledge are both strong forms of knowledge, in which the knower has a high degree of confidence about his conclusions, they contain aspects which weaken each other when they are cross-bred like in history. The compromise between the objective and subjective forces of history, hence, implies the specific problems of historical conclusions.

Admittedly, all knowledge could be regarded as a combination of subjectivity and objectivity, since all information needs to pass our subjective minds to become knowledge. However, to let this limit the distinction would not be very fruitful. As I see it, the specific conditions of historical knowledge can be pointed out using a biological analogy: People with blood group A have B antibodies, and people with bloodgroup B have A-antibodies. If we let A represent scientific knowledge and B represent artistic knowledge, then history is represented by bloodgroup AB, (which does not have any antibodies). In case of a blood transfusion, people of blood group AB can thus receive

blood from both A and B without any major problems. However, if AB blood is given to any of A or B, the latter's antibodies would strike out the AB blood. That is, translating this to knowledge matters, problems occur when history is outside its natural body – for instance, analysed as an objective scientific report, without taking into consideration the creative aspects of history – but the influence of scientific and artistic knowledge on history is profitable as long as one is aware of the specific problems of history. However, the above model is of course simplified and used to emphasise the differences between the kinds of knowledge. In fact, the similarities might even outnumber the differences. After all, all knowledge is based upon observation of the world, and in a larger perspective ultimately treat the same questions.

Now, with the walls raised, we can go on to the roofing. Flaubert once commented that 'writing history was like drinking an ocean and pissing a cupful'<sup>2</sup> – a comment that seems to hold some truth. The condensation from an endless amount of information into something useful, the essence, must involve a selection. The problem is thus that history has to be the historian's choice, based on his or her interpretations. Consequently, doubts can be raised as to whether the selection and interpretation processes reflect the object of study, reality, satisfactorily. Asking a Palestinian Arab historian and an Israeli Jewish historian about the history of Palestine/Israel would perhaps result in slightly different answers. Furthermore, some historians even argue that history is created the moment it is written. This is a view that acknowledges the subjective influences in history, and emphasises the artist's influence on the historian's work. The view of others, that the historian's task is to uncover the traces of history through documents, accounts and other evidence, seemingly has the scientific rigour as the dominant influence on the historian. Either way, the historian has to take an active part, thus creating insecurities concerning the conclusions.

Yet another problem that the historian faces, is the aspect of time connected to his interpretations. Historians, like everyone else, are affected by the time in which they live, with its specific society, ideas and attitudes. Whereas facts do not change particularly over time – a bracelet from the Bronze Age is still a bracelet, even if it looks a little older today – our interpretation of these facts certainly change. And, as Håkan Arvidsson has argued, since facts are, ultimately, just our way of breaking up indissoluble contexts, they mean nothing until they are put back in a reconstructed context. "And at the construction of these contexts," he argues, "the historian is inexorably trapped by the spirit of the time".<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the historian's conclusions, in this view, have their validity limited to a specific time. When the interpretations no longer are valid, the conclusions derived from them can no longer be justified. But does this imply that historical knowledge is useless, since it is only temporary? No, certainly not. After all, history does not only depict past times, it is also a mirror of our own society; in the light of history, we can re-evaluate contemporary phenomena. And even if a historical conclusion cannot promise to hold truth for all foreseeable future, it must still have a value for the moment.

However, the spirit of the time is not the only factor influencing the historian's 'artistic self' and his interpretations. A current example of how historians with different backgrounds can come to different conclusions from the same facts is the Wallenberg-investigation. Raoul Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat who saved ten thousands of Hungarian Jews in World War II, before he was arrested by the Red Army in 1944 and never returned. More, than 50 years after his disappearance, many historians have studied his destiny without been able to come to a satisfactory conclusion. Recently, there has been a Swedish-Russian expert group, going over newly released documents in Russian archives, and though they were working together, in their final reports in January 2001, the Swedish and the Russian researchers had come to different conclusions. The Swedish side had as one of their two hypotheses that Wallenberg was alive after July 1947, the date when some documents maintain that he died, and kept in isolation as long as maybe even to 1989 – a hypothesis which the Russian side dismisses. This is peculiar, considering the fact that both sides had access to the same material, and begs the question what the reason is for the difference. Ideology? Culture? Nationalism? Personal interests? All of the above are variables with the potential to influence the force of imagination, and affect historical conclusions. Surely, one reason for the difference, in this case, is because the historians do not have enough information and are forced to speculate. Admittedly, the more information, the closer is the gap between different interpretations, but the point should still be clear. Information and historical facts always have to be interpreted and put in a context, and in this process insecurities do exist.

So which conclusions can be drawn from the discussion above? To say that a historian can never be confident about his or her conclusions would mean that the subject of history is reduced to no more than an advanced form of guesswork, and that would be, despite the problems of history, an exaggeration. On the other hand, saying that the historian can be fully confident, combining the forces of the scientist and the artist would, to my mind, be to disregard the implications of the problem of objectivity and reliability of history itself. The hardly exciting answer is, hence, that the answer is somewhere in the middle. When all criteria are met, adequate facts have been presented, critically interpreted and put in a proper context, the historian can to a large extent be 100 confident about his or her conclusions. However, due to the nature of the subject, a historian can never, be fully confident. The architect, returning to the opening analogy, can only hope that his house will sustain the tests to which it is going to be exposed.

**1571 words**

#### **FOOTNOTES**

1 Thorsten Thurén: *Källkritik (Criticism of Source)*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell 1997, 9.

2 John Pemble, *Venice Rediscovered*. Oxford 1995, 82-3. in Richard J. Evans: *In Defence of History*. London: Granta Books, 1997, 23.

3 Håkan Arvidsson: "Historikern i tidens fångelse" in Tove Kruse (red): *Bud på Historien*.

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