

Understanding History: Its Meaning and Essence

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Abstract

The recent emergence of various new approaches to study in the social sciences has resulted in the mixing of various scientific disciplines in their theoretical and methodological implementation. Thus, it is sometimes difficult for us to distinguish between one study of scientific disciplines and another, except to understand the scientific philosophy of each. In addition, history as a scientific discipline also experiences an increase in meaning in its learning, because history is only understood as limited to past events. This paper aims to explain various definitions of history, the purpose of studying history, and the essence of history. The benefits expected from reading this study are to gain an understanding of history conceptually and theoretically, especially for students and other parties interested in historical studies.

Keywords: *History, Historical Meaning, Historical Essence*

1. INTRODUCTION

History is a term that is very popular in various circles of society, which is simply interpreted as past events or events. Because of that, what humans experienced and did in the past is then called history. History is so important and valuable that Cicero once said in front of a Roman senate court almost a century before the birth of Jesus Christ, that: "if we don't know what happened before we were born, it means we are still small children" (Adam, 2006: vii). Then for what and from what perspective or from whom is the past studied and told? It is from these questions that the process of discovering history in a meaningful way must begin, before finally entering and touching the core zone of substantive study and ordering it in story form as a reconstruction of events.

The first question (for what?), relates to the objective aspect as well as the rational argument that legitimizes one's reasons for studying history. In fact, it is a justification for someone's interest

to make a reconstruction of the past through historical stories. This is important considering that not all types of events or categories of past events are considered useful for humans afterwards.

The leading Indonesian historian, Taufik Abdullah, at least once described how history or the past is very easy to invite varied responses. Even this professor of history who earned his doctorate at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, gave several views that were mutually controversial about history. He described that Herder saw history as a process towards achieving the highest humanity (*menschheit*), while Voltaire said history was nothing more than a "tableau of human stupidity". Then it is described about a Hindu who desires to get out of history which is considered *samsara*, while a Marxist actually considers history with its dialectical rhythm as a process towards achieving an ideal classless society (Abdullah, 2005).

The description shows that whether or not a past is studied is highly dependent on its functional benefits. That is, what the past is told/recounted for is the main key underlying the decision to write about it. Presumably this is what prompted Peter Novick, the author of the book "That Noble Dream" to say that writing history is full of decisions (Novick, 1988); (Storey, 2011: 1).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper is a literature review through the search for and utilization of sources that are relevant to the study of the meaning and essence of history. Types of literature used as writing sources are: books, scientific articles, archives, popular scientific articles, and other sources.

This study uses 4 (four) stages of historical work, namely heuristics, criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Gottschalk, 1975). At the heuristic stage, namely finding and collecting sources relevant to this research. Types of data sources such as: archives, reports, books, journal articles, and other sources are collected through searches of library collections and private collections.

At the source criticism stage, a series of criticisms is made on sources that are data related to other sources. After the process of comparing sources whose contents discuss the same problem, then proceed to the data interpretation stage. The final stage is historiography, namely presenting the reconstruction of events in the form of historical stories (Ahmadin, 2013b). Considering that the topic of this study is history and the principle of its benefit to human life in society, this study is included in the category of introductory history.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To get a clear picture of the nature of history, we will first explain what history is?. After that, it will be explained about the purpose of studying history and what is the true essence of history? These three things will at least become the main points in understanding history as an event and history as a science.

3.1. What is History?

The term history in many literatures, its meaning and significance are considered equivalent to the word "Syajaratun" (read: syajarah) in Arabic which means "tree". The interconnectedness or relationship between one event and another in a different period (past and present) or a different space, inspires the assumption of identifying history as a tree of life. Like the nature of a tree, history (every event) experienced by mankind has countless roots and branches. Then on the branches also grow and develop dense leaves, flowers, and fruit.

In addition, the word syajarah in Arabic also has other meanings which mean "descendant" and "origin". Even Syajarah is also often associated with the meaning of the word silsilah which means sequence, series, relationship, and list of descendants. Another Arabic term that refers to the meaning of the word like that is ta'rikh (from the word arkh which means the recording of a certain event at a certain time) means yearbook, chronicle, year calculation, history book, date, and date recording.

The historical terminology used in Indonesian through the intermediary of Malay literature, when referring to the General Indonesian Dictionary (Poerwadarminta, 1989), contains 3 meanings, namely: (1) Old literature, genealogy, and origins; (2) Events that actually happened in the past; and (3) Science.

History is also a language translation of the word "history" (English), the origin of the word comes from the Ancient Greek "Historia" (read: istoria). This term is also synonymous with the words "geschichte" (Germany) and "geschiedenis" (Dutch). Each of these terms means a story about events or events that occurred in the past (Gottschalk, 1975).

According to Sjamsuddin who cites F. Muller's view of "Methodology of History" by Jerzy Topolski, in Ancient Greek texts the term *historia* contains three meanings: (1) research (research) and reports on that research; (2) a poetic story; and (3) a precise description of the facts. In fact, according to him, apart from the term *historia*, it is also found in the Greek word *historyo*, which is interpreted as: to search, to examine or ask (to inquire), to examine (to examine). All of these words are related to the Indo-European root *vid*, from which the Latin *video*, *voir* and *sovoir* in French, *wissen* in German (Helius, 2007).

It is from the roots of these words or terms that various definitions of history were built by experts (historians) so that various meanings form repertoires and even interesting discourses are discussed. From the basis of this word or term also, Gazalba makes a literal formulation of the meaning of history which contains 4 (four) meanings, namely (1) a word that refers to something that has passed, an event or an event; (2) a word that has a historical meaning from the first meaning; (3) all knowledge of the past; and (4) science that seeks to determine and pass on knowledge (Gazalba, 1981).

This understanding implies that a person's longing to visit the past that has been buried by time is actually driven by curiosity about an event or event that functionally has a meaningful relationship with his present life. Therefore, Abdullah makes two categories of history in a connotative sense, namely history as events that actually happened in the past (*histoire-realite*) and history in the sense of stories (stories) about the past (*histoire-recite*) (Abdullah, 2005).

S.K. Kochhar through his writing "Teaching of History", explains that the terms history and *historia* (Greek: Information or research) are basically activities aimed at obtaining the truth. In fact, according to him, the history of that period was only about humans and their stories; the story of his attempts to make ends meet; efforts to create an orderly and orderly life; his love of independence, as well as his thirst for beauty and knowledge (Kochhar, 1984).

The interconnection between the present and the past has stimulated the author of the book "What is History?", Edward Hallet Carr says that: history is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, and unending dialogue between the present and the past. This

statement shows that history is a continuous process of interaction between historians and facts. It is even an endless dialogue between the present and the past (Carr, 2003).

In a book titled *The Idea of History* explained that history is a kind of investigation into the activities that have been carried out by humans in the past (Collingwood & Collingwood, 1994). Meanwhile, according to Henri Pirenne, the French historian who wrote the famous book "*Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe*", defines history as a story about events and human actions that live in society (Pirenne, 2015).

In the effort to introduce a more elaborative understanding of history, several definitions can be put forward (quoted) by Kochhar (2008) as follows:

1. Burckhardt; History is a record of a period that is found and considered useful in generations after another.
2. Miller; history is a record of the journey of human life like the ocean. People who come and go, tell the story of development and fall, and that is what is called history.
3. Marc Bloch; History is the science of human beings within the scope of time.
4. H.G. wells; Human history is actually a history of ideas.
5. E.H. Carr; history is an endless dialogue between the present and the past.
6. Gurudev; There is only one history, namely the history of mankind.
7. Pt. Nehru; history is the story of the struggle of mankind throughout the ages in dealing with nature and its elements, against wild animals and wildernesses and some other humans, who in various ways try to control and exploit for their own interests (Kochhar, 1984).

Some of the historical meanings and definitions described above are intended as an effort to identify more comprehensively their meanings and meanings. Even a number of opinions about the definition of history, will be a forming element for the creation of a solid foundation of understanding of the nature of historical science.

3.2. The Purpose of Studying History

Paul Thompson, through his questioner entitled "The Voice of the Past" (2012), said that history depends on its social goals. Although according to him the intended purpose is vague and overt, it is acknowledged that through history people try to understand the upheavals and changes they have experienced in their lives.

Another example of the strategic choice of writing history, can also be seen from the tendency of the famous Athenian general of the caliber of Thucydides to write his history book about the Poleponesian War, by not fully reviewing the events that took place within thirty years of the war. Instead, he creates a narrative about a number of important moments such as Pericles' famous elegy (speech or words of respect) for the Athenian soldiers who died (Storey, 2011: 2).

The reluctance of a person or group of people to study history, the trigger can also be caused by past trauma from an event that they experienced. Therefore, it is natural to have principles that are relevant to the term "breaking with the past" (breaking ties with the past).

The fact that is similar in context, can be seen in the different views between Japanese and Chinese (and Korean) people regarding the historical heritage, Yasukuni Shrine. In this shrine which was built in 1869, around 2.5 million Japanese people who died during the war were buried. Such is the importance of this burial place of heroes consisting of soldiers, nurses and scholars, that many Japanese people consider it a place worth visiting to offer prayers. In contrast, the existence of the Yasukuni Shrine in the eyes of the Chinese and South Koreans is different and is considered a symbol of Japanese cruelty. Imagine, in this historical place also buried Prime Minister General Hideki Tojo (the person who is considered responsible for the atrocities of Japan during World War II) and 13 other class A war criminals. Therefore, visiting this place means bringing up old wounds (Ahmadin, 2005).

The second question (what perspective or whose perspective), relates to methodological aspects and approaches that will be used to reconstruct past events in the form of historical stories. Thus, the choice of this type of methodology and model of approach, in turn, gave birth to various

historiographical patterns. So, where do the roots of the historical term really have to be explored before getting the full concept tree?

3.3. The Essence and Nature of History

History, which has its starting point in the study of human beings (actors/actors), events (events), space (place), and time (the past), methodologically has its own philosophy, its own problems, and its own explanation. Thus, an understanding of the nature of history is very important and determines the way a historian works and the historical works that will be produced.

Regarding the nature of history like this, it is explained by Kuntowijoyo who relies on his views as well as his criticism on several ideas, including: Wilhelm Dilthey with the concept of *Geisteswissenschaft* and its inner context, Hans-George Gadamer through his *Truth and method*, and John Galtung who introduced diachronic concept. Inspired by some of these concepts, this historian and writer of novels and poems explains the nature of history as an independent science (Kuntowijoyo, 2005).

First, history as a science is to interpret, understand, and understand. Dilthey divides knowledge into two kinds, namely knowledge of the outside world or *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) and knowledge of the inner world or *Geisteswissenschaften* (humanities, human studies, cultural studies). Along with other human sciences such as: economics, sociology, social anthropology, psychology, comparative religion, law, political science, philology and literary criticism, history is included in this family. Thus, the approach to this second type of knowledge is hermeneutics, namely understanding the "inner context" of actions that are not expressed in the words of the perpetrator himself. One of the examples he shows is how to interpret Plato dialogues, a written document.

Although Dilthey is often accused of mixing up hermeneutics for *Geisteswissenschaften* with *verstehen* for history, Kuntowijoyo still admits his way of thinking on two things, namely: (1) humans can only be understood through the concept of life, not from abstract concepts. *Naturwissenschaften*, (2) humans are historical creatures, therefore they can only be explained through their history. In short, history and *Geisteswissenschaften* in his view are based on the same

method, namely Verstehen (experience in penetrating the soul and all human experiences or efforts to place oneself in another).

The unique nature possessed by the science of history shows how important a special approach is in explaining historical phenomena, both concerning the causes and the course of events; about the character's life; deeds; thought; and words. In short, the approach used in the Naturwissenschaften study is not in accordance with the nature or nature of the Geisteswissenschaften. The tsunami in Aceh, the collapse of the Suramadu Bridge, earthquakes, long droughts, and various other natural events (See also other examples in Kuntowijoyo) can certainly be analyzed for reasons and consequences with certainty according to the theory obtained cumulatively. On the basis of the uniqueness and incompatibility of this approach, it seems that this is a strong reason for Kuntowijoyo's tendency to use the term "explanation" to explain historical phenomena.

Second, history: extends in time, limited in space. In discussing the nature of history, Kuntowijoyo revealed that there is one aspect of history that Dilthey forgot, namely history is a process, history is development. Even so, according to him, this deficiency has been complemented by John Galtung with the statement that history is a diachronic science, while other social sciences are synchronic sciences. Even Kuntowijoyo emphasizes that there is a crossover between history which is diachronic and other social sciences which is synchronic. That is, there are times when history uses social science and vice versa, social science uses history.

Historical topics that are diachronic in nature, several examples can be put forward (besides those put forward by Kuntowijoyo) as follows: "Customary Administrative Law in the Kingdom of Luwu in the VIII-XX centuries"; "Youth Revolution: Japanese Occupation and Resistance in Java 1944-1946"; "Regional Social History of South Sulawesi: Makassar City 1900-1950"; and others. The diachronic nature of some of these topics/titles is reflected through the use of the year number of the event in question.

Apart from that, several other social science topics that are synchronic in nature will also be presented as follows: "The Birth of Heretical Sects in Indonesia"; "Student Brawl: A Social Conflict";

"Women Workforce: The Case of Three Cities in South Sulawesi"; and others. Some of these topics, show their nature inversely proportional to the examples of previous topics.

Third, History: describes a single phenomenon. History, like other social sciences, has a description and explanation. However, history is different from other sciences. In narration, history is ideographic, singularizing, while other social sciences draw general laws (nomothetic, generalizing).

The nature of history which describes a single phenomenon can be seen in examples of topics that are different (but of the same nature) as Kuntowijoyo as follows: "The Struggle of the People of Luwu Against Imperialism 1905-1942" (Ridha, 2022); "Malays in Makassar XVI-XVII Century" (Nomay & Ahmadin, 2009); "Kahar Muzakkar Rebellion: From Tradition to DI/TII" (Harvey, 1989); and others. The reconstruction of events in a historical story made by these historians, of course, only applies specifically to the struggles of the people of Luwu, Malays in Makassar, and the Kahar Muzakkar Rebellion. That is, not for other events (in different places) and not for all kinds of people's struggles, all Malays,

The characteristics of other social sciences that attract general and general laws can be seen in the following examples: "City Dynamics and Changes in Social Spaces" (Ahmadin, 2013a); "Traditional Fishermen"; "Agrarian Society", "Maritime Universe", and others. Through these general topics, there is an opportunity for people to make generalizations. This means that concepts and theories about changes in social spaces, traditional fishing, agrarian society, and the maritime world, can apply at different times and places.

After analyzing several components regarding the nature of history, one thing that needs to be noted is that there is actually no intention to partially create a kind of dichotomy between history and other social sciences. The fact shows that in the development of the historiographical tradition so far, it is very difficult to avoid the occurrence of "coagulation" between history and social science. Thus, the integrative collaboration between social science disciplines in various scientific studies causes an explanation of the nature of historical science to not fully apply. Even so, the process of discovering the nature of historical science is very important in the context of scientific awareness

that it has its own philosophical basis, its own problems and its own explanation. In short, integration is legal for anyone as long as they are able to realize that they are writing history.

Just to describe a little about the collaboration of several scientific disciplines in studying historical events, including the efforts made by Karl Lamprecht. His interest in this multidisciplinary approach began when a number of professional historians in the late 19th century were disillusioned with the history of the Neo-Van Ranke school, which emphasized historians' attention to political history and famous people only. Lamprecht also introduced the concept of "collective history" whose materials were obtained from various disciplines, such as: Wilhelm Wundt's "Social Psychology" and Friedrich Ratzel's "Human Geography"; both were Lamprecht's colleagues at the University of Leipzig. This social psychological approach is applied in the book *History of Germany 1819-1909* (Burke, 2005).

In addition, in the American historiographical tradition, *The New History* appeared in 1912 with the main character, James Harvey Robinson, who advocated the use of social sciences in writing history. In French historiography in the 1920s, an interest in "new kind of history" was also born with the founding of *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (1929) pioneered by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. They also yearn for history to have a "wider and more human history". History should no longer be merely a narrative of events, but an analysis of structure. Meanwhile, in the late 1960s in America social scientific history developed (Kuntowijoyo, 2005).

4. CONCLUSION

Understanding history both conceptually and the reconstruction of events is fundamental for everyone, both students, teachers, historical researchers, and society in general. This is based on an assumption that the nature of the existence of something can only be understood through historical thinking and methodologies. The existence of history becomes material in an effort to dialogue between present phenomena and past events that have similarities both in terms of the motives of the incident and its impact. Furthermore, history serves as a valuable lesson for generations across the ages in responding to present life and preparing to organize life in the future. For this purpose, studying history must at least depart from a number of main questions, namely why was history written?, for whom was it written?, and how to write it. The first two questions are oriented

towards the purpose of writing and the target readers of history, while how to write relates to historiographical methods and approaches.

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