

Methodological Pluralism in Historical Studies: An Analysis

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Abstract: Methodological pluralism is different ways of knowing things, different multiple methodologies i.e. multimethodologies for acquiring a full description of a particular field. It stresses on the view that no reality can be explained by a single theory or fully examined by using a single approach. Historical reality in historical studies is no exception. While the universalistic approach to study historical reality entails a common methodological perspective with similar methods across time and space, the particularistic approach stresses on specific historical contexts within which historical facts happened and commensurate methods to interpret historical reality. So, conceptualising and interpreting historical reality in historical studies necessitates the use of multiple methods with multi-methodological approach considering different historical contexts.

Keywords: Historical reality, Multiple methodologies, Universalistic approach, Particularistic approach.

INTRODUCTION

Historical Studies refers to the study of historical facts by the act of learning, analysing and investigating the past through reading, research and formal educational system. These facts are remembered, revealed, remarked, resonated and resulted through historical method. Thus, comes historiography referring to the study of the history and methodology of history as a discipline. In this context the historical thinking becomes important which ponders over the five concepts of change over time, causality, context, complexity and contingency. Seixas & Morton (2013) have conceived of six concepts regarding historical thinking: historical significance, primary source evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perceptions, and ethical dimensions. All these concepts together form the basis of historical inquiry. Thus, historical studies require the systematic, evidence-based investigation of past events, people, and societies to understand how they shaped the present by analysing primary sources like documents, artifacts etc. and secondary sources like scholarly interpretations to reconstruct, interpret, and explain the “why” and “how” behind historical developments. So historical studies need appropriate methods to study the historical facts and historical reality.

Historical Reality

Then historical studies point to the study of historical reality which entails all tangible evidences and memory that connects us to the previous era, including both external events and internal, subjective experiences. Thus, historical reality is distinct from myths, legends, or later interpretations.

The key characteristics of historical reality are very important with respect to the methods of historical studies. Historical reality seeks to represent the past as it was- the “actual actuality” of people and events. Historical reality goes beyond facts in that it is simply not listing dates to explore why events happened, their causes, effects, and interpretations. Historical reality is a kind of constructed truth, made by historians working with limited, biased sources to provide the most accurate representation of the past possible. It is evidence-based relying on tangible, observable, or documented evidence to separate genuine history from fiction, minimising bias and maximising historical understanding through evidence. Thus, historical reality is contrasted with “historical narrative”- the story we tell, and “historical memory”- how we remember.

So, the issue of objectivity is a prime one in historical reality studies in that historians’ work is very much limited by available resources and interpretations, making “historical truth” a complex concept. Herein comes contextual evidence of historical reality which is

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studied through archaeological, written and oral evidence.

Methodological Issues

The key aspects of historical studies have been the following aspects: Systematic methodology, Types of evidence, Analysis over description, Interpretation and context, and Purpose. Systematic methodology refers to the process by which the researchers identify, authentic, and critically analyse evidence or sources to form conclusions. Historical sources are of different types like official records, diaries, photography, artifacts, oral testimonies etc. One of the key aspects has been the analysis over description in that the researchers should go beyond just stating facts and interpret the facts why events happened in a certain way. Now comes the issues of interpretation and context so that historical events are placed within their proper context by acknowledging the reality that interpretations can evolve. Finally comes the issue of purpose of the historical studies so that the researchers gain insights into human experiences, understand the development of cultures and institutions, and inform the process of decision-making to be used in future.

Now the issues of methodology. Here there should be clear ideas about the terms of method and methodology. While method connotes a way of doing something- a procedure, methodology refers to a discourse about methods, referring to a discourse about the adequacy and appropriateness of particular combination of research principles and procedures to know historical reality. Then comes the issue of methodological pluralism or epistemological pluralism. Kellert et. al (2006) have opined that there has been different ways of knowing things, different epistemological methodologies for attaining a full description of a particular field. Then methodological pluralism or epistemological pluralism is different ways of knowing things – different methodologies or multimethodologies for attaining a full description of a particular field. So, multimethodology does not refer to multi-methodologies, but multiple methodological perspectives.

Now comes the issues of desirability and feasibility of methodological pluralism in studying historical reality and historical studies. Then comes the question of choice of method(s) - mono method, mixed methods and multi-method.

Methodological Pluralism

Before delving into the issue of pluralism let us see what monism is. In contrast to pluralism comes monism, which points to a single approach like reductionism asserting the study of all historical facts in terms of finding relations to some few basic entities (Schaffer, 2009). But, the question is whether historical reality can be known only through a monistic way. There is ongoing controversy between a single epistemological

approach and pluralistic epistemological approach. While only one analytic interest is being pursued in a single approach design in monomethod design, two or more analytic perspectives are pursued in a mixed or multiple approach design. Thus arises the issue of methodological pluralism.

Methodological pluralism refers to an approach which stresses on the use of more than one method which is called monomethod research. It thus refers to multimethodology or multimethod research or mixed methods research through the use of multiple data, methods, methodologies, perspectives, standpoints, and paradigms. The approach is pluralistic in nature.

It is quite natural to reject the idea that one type of methods is automatically better than another and thus the idea of methodological pluralism has been promoted by Bell and Newby (1977). As per the purpose of the historical study a historian should select a method or a set of methods to get a holistic view of the historical reality. Of course, neither every historian would use every type of research method during a research project on historical facts, nor should he/she be proficient at all research methods. Actually, the plurality would be achieved in the total research output of the discipline as a whole in the long run (Bell and Roberts, 1984).

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Methodological Pluralism in Historical Studies

Historical study is very much distinct from simply reading the past and so is historical reality from social reality. Historical studies is a critical, analytical process designed to understand the human experience through time. But the approach to study historical reality is similar to social reality. That is why multiple methods and perspectives are applied to study historical reality like the study of social reality.

As there have been two broad approaches and perspectives, namely, universalistic and particularistic approaches, both the approaches are applied to study historical reality with the help of multiple methods.

The universalistic approach to study historical reality aims to identify the broad contours of historical facts which are similar across the geographical regions and the civilizations over different time periods. Then the interpretations of historical facts try to correlate all facts and figures from a deductive perspective. The methods

applied in universalistic approach to study historical reality have been similar across time and space.

On the other hand, the particularistic approach to study historical reality stresses on specific historical contexts within which historical facts happened and influenced by different historical locations. This approach suggests that the historical happenings and activities cannot be separated from the context in which the historical facts occurred. That is why the particularistic approach calls for specific methods to study historical reality.

While the historians agree on general and basic principles in universalistic approach regarding the use of various methods to study historical reality, they differ on using the methods for studying historical fields like religion, art, science, and social justice which require the particularistic approach. There is no particular standard for these 'essentially contested' fields as these fields require diverse tools particular to each field in order to interpret the historical realities from these fields.

There are so many methods like quantitative method, discourses analysis, oral history method, comparative method, micro-historical method etc. used to study historical realities. But the selection of one or more methods depends on the approach to study the historical reality.

CONCLUSION

So the historical studies need appropriate methods as per the approach and perspective of the historical realities. But like social reality the historical reality is also very much complex in nature. Then the complexity of historical reality demands an approach of methodological pluralism to grasp dynamic multi-dimensionality of historical reality by using multiple methods.

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